

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE CHILDREN* *OF VIOLENCE SERIES*

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### ABSTRACT

Martha Quest, the protagonist of the novels of *The Children of Violence* series, (*Martha Quest*, *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, *Landlocked* and *The Four-Gated City*) can easily be identified with the author herself. Throughout the series, the development of Martha from a teenager to a free woman is chronicled with an omniscient narrator reflecting inner consciousness. Lessing, in the characterization of the protagonist, poured out all her emotion, philosophy and political standpoint that are clearly manifest in the narrative technique. The study attempts to pick up the elements of author's personal life illustrating the events and thought process of the narrator.

**KEYWORDS:** Autobiographical Narrator, Autobiography of Consciousness, Gender, D H Lawrence

### INTRODUCTION

Writing a series of five novels titled *The Children of Violence* from 1952 to 1969, Doris Lessing chronicles the life of Martha Quest: a teenager who scorns her parents' Victorian principles, through a young woman's two unsuccessful marriages and a flirtation with Communism, to a free woman who tries to live actively rather than passively. The novels of the series, *Martha Quest*, *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, *Landlocked* and *The Four-Gated City* show Martha Quest as developing from one volume to another from a self confident adolescent girl to a relatively liberated woman. The novels can be seen from parallel perspectives: they represent both a kind of autobiographical past, in which the emotions and thought-processes of the maturing woman are portrayed with verisimilitude; and they also represent the attempts of the individual to solve the eternal dilemma of man's search for meaning in life.

There is an autobiographical narrator in the novels representing ages through which Lessing has already passed. When Martha approaches Lessing's own age at the time of writing, there is a change in narrative technique to comprise the inner perception of the character. We can say that the entire series is autobiographical, as it shifts from an autobiography of events, in the first four books, to an autobiography of consciousness in *The Four-Gated City*, and that finally, in the Appendix, when Martha fuses with the narrator in the first-person epistolary section, Lessing is speaking directly to her readers.

Doris Lessing was born in Kermanshah, Persia, on October 22, 1919. Her father, Alfred Taylor moved his family to Persia, in order to take up a job as a clerk for the Imperial Bank of Persia. The family later moved to the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1925, to farm maize. The farming was not successful and failed to deliver the wealth the Taylors had expected. Doris was educated in a Roman Catholic convent all-girls school in Salisbury. She left school at 14, and thereafter, was self-educated; and worked as a nursemaid; and it was about this time that she started reading material about politics and sociology that her employer gave her to read. She began writing around that time.

In 1937, she moved to Salisbury to work as a telephone operator, and she soon married her first husband, Frank Wisdom, with whom she had two children, before the marriage ended in 1943. After her divorce, Lessing was drawn to Communist Left Book Club, and it was there that she met her second husband, Gottfried Lessing. They were married shortly after she joined the group, and had a child, before the marriage also ended up in a divorce in 1949. Gottfried Lessing was sent to Uganda, where he became the East German ambassador, and was murdered in the 1979 rebellion against Idi Amin Dada. Because of her commitment (engagement) in the campaign against nuclear arms and South African apartheid, Doris Lessing was banned from that country and from Rhodesia for many years. Therefore, she moved to London with her youngest son, in 1949, and it was then that she published her first novel *The Grass is Singing*. The book which made her really famous was *The Golden Notebook*, published in 1962. On October 11th 2007, Doris Lessing was announced as the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. At 87, she is the oldest person to have received the literature prize, and the third oldest Nobel Laureate in any category. She also stands as only the eleventh woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature by the Swedish Academy, in its 106-year history.

### **Martha Quest and Doris Lessing**

Martha's intellectual development and self-exile from her homeland parallels in many ways the circumstances in which Lessing herself has been a part. But Martha's changing thinking and activities suggest something of greater significance for the series as an extended work of fiction than merely an author's creation of a *persona* that is intentionally autobiographical. Martha, like Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook*, is consciously set up as the prototype of the sensitive modern woman who finds the easy answers about sex, politics, and so forth, given her by a masculine society less satisfying. The only recourse for such a woman, then, is to rebel, first in overt ways against the mores and established principles of thinking and behaving, and later is more dramatic, immutable ways, such as deliberate social action designed to better the conditions of those abused by established society, and, finally, by leaving the country for a presumed better world elsewhere.

This self-styled emancipation is, however, somewhat more complicated a reaction than the merely rebellious seeking after freedom one finds in, say, Mary McCarthy, with whom Lessing is sometimes compared. McCarthy, for instance, sometimes presents women who adventurously try to act "free" sexually by having casual affairs or by getting divorced because it is a "fashionable" thing to do (e.g., the story "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment"); but Lessing's heroine, whatever her name or peculiar circumstances, continually attempts to arrive at an ideal sexual relationship and thus is less promiscuous in intent than a number of Miss McCarthy's heroines.

Idealism is similarly seen in Lessing's characters' involvement politically. Perhaps best exemplified in her novel, *Retreat to Innocence*, this trait leads this prototypical heroine to identify herself with radical social and political movements as a means of bringing about a corrective to the many injustices in the civilized world. True, disillusionment inevitably sets in, but little of the indifferent cynicism again to be found in Miss McCarthy is noticed in Lessing's characters. In other words, while the realization that this is not a perfectible world has to be accepted by these heroines, the reaction is not one in which all values and goals discarded as ineffective. Martha Quest leaves Rhodesia not because she has changed in goals or given up in the drive to make these visible, but rather because she realistically accepts the inevitability and effective control of the white colonial way of life, and so relocates in an attempt to follow her ideals in a more compatible atmosphere. In this respect Lessing's prototypical heroine seems to be representative of many such characters in modern fiction: combining the idealistic, romantic fervor of a heroine from the Victorian era with the blasé, sophisticated, and self-consciously emancipated qualities of a modern woman, this heroine whatever she is named, pushes inexorably on to the individual decision she alone must make, a decision not to fight blindly against overwhelming odds nor to give up when

opposing forces first confront her, but rather to attempt in a wholly dedicated manner to bring about in practice her ideals and then to adjust her tactics when the situation in which she finds herself is altered.

The novels in the *Series* have an autobiographical narrator representing ages through which Lessing has already passed. When Martha comes up to Lessing's own age at the time of writing, there is a shift in narrative technique to include the internal consciousness of the character. It is important to keep in mind that by the time the last two volumes of the series had been written, Lessing was steeped in Sufi philosophy (Knapp xiv-xvii). We can term the entire series as autobiographical, as it shifts from an autobiography of events, in the first four books, to an autobiography of consciousness in *The Four-Gated City*, and that finally, in the Appendix, when Martha fuses with the narrator in the first-person epistolary section, Lessing is speaking directly to her readers in a warning, and is offering a signpost to man's possible future development.

The point of narrative distance, that is, the distance between narrator and author, narrator and characters, and narrator and reader, is an important one in discerning the depths of the ideology expressed in Lessing's writings. Lanser points out an important effect of distancing an author from his or her work: "one effect of isolating the text from social realities is the complete disregard of gender in the formalist study of narrative voice .... Yet contemporary research has amply demonstrated that gender is one of the strongest determinants of social, linguistic, and literary behavior in patriarchal societies" (Lanser 1981). Further, Lanser quotes Robert Weimann as stating that point of view provides "'a potential link between the actual and the fictive modes of narrative communication and representation', integrating social and aesthetic form." (Lanser 1981)

Lessing's ideological and artistic attitudes shape this series in important ways. The fact that gender is an important consideration is shown in the quantity of feminist critical interest in Lessing. That Lessing has a message which she is trying to convey directly to her readers is shown in her statement, in *A Small Personal Voice*, that "we are living at a time which is so dangerous, violent, explosive, and precarious that it is in question whether soon there will be people left alive to write books and to read them." (Lessing 1974) Lessing has stated a number of times that she is concerned with the role of writing and reading as part of the evolution of consciousness:

This question of I, who am I, what different levels there are inside of us, is very relevant to writing, to the process of creative writing about which we know nothing whatsoever. (Lessing 1974)

The narrator in *The Children of Violence* changes from the autobiographical omniscience of the first four books to the problematic shifting voices in *The Four-Gated City*; it also merges more directly with Lessing's own voice throughout the series. Martin tells us, in *Recent Theories of Narrative*, that the contending languages of the everyday world are used for the transmission of ideas and attitudes .... The purpose of the novel, in Bakhtin's view, is to represent these differences so that they will become visible and to allow them to interact. (Martin 1986) The 'contending languages' that Bakhtin was concerned with are what we might call "tones of speech"; for instance, we can say the same sentence, such as "What a nice dress" in a number of different ways to convey a wide range of meanings, such as compliment, sarcasm, envy, frustration, or disappointment.

Lessing's omniscient narrator is nonetheless not strictly a nineteenth-century one; she does not always tell us explicitly that the thoughts we are reading belong to a particular character. For instance, when the teenage Martha envisions her perfect city of the future, she excludes her parents, the Van Rensbergs, in fact most of the people of the district, forever excluded from the golden city because of their pettiness of vision and small understanding. (Lessing 1964)

We are not told explicitly that these are Martha's thoughts, but we may assume they are hers because the language used carries the righteous tone of the teenager, who has yet to see her own limitations, and can therefore be smugly critical of the limitations of others.

The narrator, ironic as always, highlights the pettiness of Martha's own vision by stating directly after this speech that Martha must always remain at the gate to her own utopia because unfortunately one gets nothing, not even a dream, without paying heavily for it, and in Martha's version of the golden age there must always be at least one person standing at the gate to exclude the unworthy. (Lessing 1964)

Early in the series, then, the omniscient narrator/author stands ironically, viewing Martha's past through the eyes of experience. But as Martin states, "Booth argued that fiction is a form of communication." (Martin 1986) As Lessing's concept of writing as a means of communication deepened, both through her own experiences and through her exposure to Sufi teaching stories, the role of the narrator deepened as well.

By the time she wrote *The Four-Gated City*, Lessing had moved away from her earlier preference for the "realist" novel. Just after the release of that novel, Lessing was interviewed by Jonah Raskin, who asked about what influenced it. She responded,

I'm very much concerned about the future. I've been reading a lot of science fiction, and I think that science fiction writers have captured our culture's sense of the future. *The Four-Gated City* is a prophetic novel. (Lessing 1974)

Obviously, Lessing's relationship to her own ideas of writing and creativity had changed as well. Like that of many contemporary writers, Lessing's use of narrative technique had become problematic.

"The disappearance of the author who addresses readers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," says Martin, "as well as the appearance of problematic and fragmentary narratives in the twentieth century, has forced readers to participate in the production as well as the interpretation of texts." (Martin 1986) With Lessing's obvious concern for mankind's future, it seems appropriate that she should attempt to engage her readers in a more direct way when she comes to discussing the breakdown, and the possible future, of our society.

Another clue to Lessing's relationship with the narrator may be seen in the many epigraphs that are found in the series. As Lanser states, extra-fictional structures, such as titles, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, and so on, have a number of uses to the author, among which are to disclose information about the author's identity; to establish rapport with the audience; to clarify the (real or ostensible) purpose of the text; to establish the relationship between the story and history. (Lanser 1981)

Because we encounter epigraphs before we read the story, moreover, and because the extrafictional voice carries the ontological status of history, it conventionally serves as the ultimate textual authority. All other voices that the text creates are subordinate to it. (Lanser 1981)

In any discussion of narrative technique in Lessing, therefore, it is naive to dismiss the role of the narrator, or to call it, as Drabble has done, "clumsy". However apparently discontinuous the narrative voice may appear to be from the beginning to the end, there are a number of elements which powerfully connect Martha Quest to *The Four-Gated City*. Narrative "voice", the distance between author and narrator, omniscience or lack of it, autobiographical elements, gender and political consciousness, and extra-fictional devices such as epigraphs, all signal us to pay attention to the way the series has been written as much as to the story itself.

Lessing is concerned with political and social issues, with the role of women and other 'minority' groups, as she states in *A Small Personal Voice*: "This is what the series of novels is about--this whole pattern of discrimination and tyranny and violence" (Lessing 1974), as well as "a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective" (Lessing 1974). This means that we cannot read *The Children of Violence* as simply a Bildungsroman thinning our focus onto the development of the protagonist, Martha Quest, alone.

### **Lessing and D H Lawrence:**

Lessing is an admirer of Lawrence, who considerably becomes an influence on Lessing. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is commonly known as a period sex romp. But Doris Lessing opines that D. H. Lawrence's landmark novel, created in the shadow of war as he was dying of tuberculosis, is an invocation to intimacy and one of the most powerful anti-war novels ever written (Lessing 2006). Lessing's reading of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as an anti-war novel suggests important intertextual relations between Lessing and Lawrence.

Paul Schlueter has rightly pointed out that at least a portion of this series does derive from another source, however, the same probable source singled out for *The Grass Is Singing*: D. H. Lawrence (Schlueter 1933). In the last months of her pregnancy, Martha and another girl, Alice also in the final stages of pregnancy, go out into the country during a rainstorm and commune with nature, in a scene that ideally should be quoted at length (Lessing 1970).

The sense of "freedom" this experience gives the two women is more than a little like experience shared by Ursula and Gudrun in Lawrence's *Women in Love*, when the two sisters swim freely in the nude (Lawrence 1960), like nymphs, dry themselves and dress (Lawrence 1960). Following their swim, the sisters sing and act playful together, after which Gudrun dances erotically before some cattle.

In both cases the two women swim in the nude, followed by erotic movements before animals clearly suggesting fertility; in the case of Martha and Alice, their grotesquely misshapen pregnant bodies are seen in relation to the spawn of frog, as full of potential life as the two women themselves. Martha, moreover, sees a green snake slithering along through the grass as part of this fruitful scene, certainly reminiscent of Lawrence's poem, "snake," The poem also concerns a snake in the presence of water, reminding the narrator in the poem of the dignity and divinity of the snake, and also of the relationship it has to the forbidden natural wisdom available only in small degree to man.

Paul Barker suggested that the shed near Thomas Stern's house in which he and Martha make love is similar to the situation in *Lady Chatterley's Love*, in which such lovemaking also occurs (Barker 1965). The parallel does exist between the two books; it is true, with the major similarity being the principal characters: Stern is the rugged peasant who enables Martha, involved in a loveless and sexless marriage, to find sexual fulfillment. One can only point out this parallel, however, not assume direct influence or borrowing, unlike the probable situation with the *Women in Love* example.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Written through omniscient narrator, Lessing reflects her inner consciousness with authoritative voice that unfolds her political views, personal likeness and ideology with the characterization of Martha Quest. Penetrating event, characterization and thought process of the narrator we can reach near the author's personal life. A study of autobiographical elements in the series results in the subtle and careful examination of the different steps of the narrator's inner thought process. Throughout the series, characterization of the protagonist and inner and the inner consciousness of the narrator merge with the author's autobiography.

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