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A STUDY OF
DORIS LESSING'S NOVELS
BY
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Introduction

Doris Lessing. Her Background and Commitment

Doris Taylor Lessing was born in 1919 in Kermanshah, Persia, into a world full of the hatred and violence of World War I, "the Great Unmentionable" as her father Alfred Cook Taylor would call it. He had already lost a leg at mid-thigh and suffered shell-shock from a war that he had sincerely hoped would end all wars. Tired of his colonial bank job in Persia, Alfred Taylor moved his wife Emily McVeagh (his nurse after the war and, as it turned out, for life) and his family to a farm in Southern Rhodesia when Doris Taylor was five. Her formal education in a convent school in Salisbury, ended when she was fourteen. Talking of those few years on the farm Mrs. Lessing says:

I spent most of my childhood alone in a landscape with very few people to dot it. At the time it was hellishly lonely, but now I realize how extraordinary it was, and how very lucky I was.¹

During that period she was an avid reader. Of particular interest to her, and of great formative effect was the literature of the nineteenth century, particularly Russian literature. Reading and daydreaming were her pastimes and because the country was "so empty we can dream - we can dream of cities and a civilization more

¹Roy Newquist, "Interview with Doris Lessing", A Small Personal Voice, ed. Paul Schlueter (Vintage Books; New York: Random House, 1975), p. 46.

beautiful than anything that has been seen in the world before."²

Doris Taylor then moved to the city where she supported herself with secretarial work. There she married when still in her teens, had two children, and was divorced. She remarried a man called Gottfried Lessing, who gave her another child before she divorced again. As she sums it up, "I do not think marriage is one of my talents".³

It was during this period that Doris Lessing began to be interested in political work because she was constantly exposed in Southern Rhodesia to one of man's great crimes against his fellow men: racial discrimination, tyranny and violence. Her father's native workers made the pitiable sum of twelve shillings a month and lived lives of poverty and enslavement.

And while the cruelties of the white man towards the black man are among the heaviest counts in the indictment against humanity, colour prejudice is not our original fault, but only one aspect of the atrophy of the imagination that prevents us from seeing ourselves in every creature that breathes under the sun.⁴

Mrs. Lessing's initiation into political activism came at the hands of the socialists and communists who were posted to Africa with the R.A.F. during the Second World

²Doris Lessing, Going Home (Panther Books; Great Britain: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1974), p. 14.

³Newquist, "Interview with Doris Lessing", p. 46.

⁴Doris Lessing, "Preface", African Stories (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. viii.

War. This group of liberal or progressive young men and women were considered the nucleus of a Communist Party. Mrs. Lessing says:

There was no Communist Party in Rhodesia. And for a period of about three years, a group of enormously idealistic and mostly extremely intellectual people created a Communist party in a vacuum which no existing Communist party anywhere in the world would have recognized as such.⁵

In 1949 she left for England, where she became a member of the Communist Party, to which she had been emotionally committed since 1942, but left it in the late fifties. From these talking-shops of socialism and her wide reading, including her favourites - Balzac, Stendhal and Tolstoy - she received her real education.

Although she was a "white" woman in Africa and although she was fully aware that "Africa belongs to the Africans" and that "the sooner they take it the better" ... yet she realized too that Africa was a great influence on her life and work. "Whatever I am" she said "I have been made so by Central Africa."⁶

Many of the themes that she deals with in her work - war, racism, sex and marriage, left-wing politics - are inseparable from her personal experiences and constantly reflect her background.

⁵Florence Howe, "A Talk with Doris Lessing," A Small Personal Voice, ed. Paul Schlueter (Vintage Books; New York: Random House, 1975), Pp. 79 - 80.

⁶Lessing, Going Home, p. 103.

In 1950, Mrs. Lessing's first novel, The Grass is Singing, was published and the following three decades have amply demonstrated the fertility and diversity of her talent. There are three volumes of personal narrative: Going Home (1957), In Pursuit of the English (1960), Particularly Cats (1967). The plays Each His Own Wilderness (1959) and Play With a Tiger (1962) have been both printed and produced; Mr. Doolittle (1958) and The Truth about Billy Newton (1961) have only been acted. Mrs. Lessing has written many short stories, some of which have been collected: This was the Old Chief's Country (1951), The Habit of Loving (1957), A Man and Two Women (1963), African Stories (1964), Winter in July (1966), The Black Madonna (1966). The novella Five (1953), and No Witchcraft for Sale (1956), come between her short stories and her novels.

The novels which were published after The Grass is Singing could be divided into two stages. The first of these is a group of five novels which she has called The Children of Violence, and which are united by the central character, Martha Quest. They consist of Martha Quest (1952), A Proper Marriage (1954), A Ripple from the Storm (1956), Landlocked (1965), and The Four-Gated City (1969). In addition to these she wrote Retreat to Innocence (1956) and The Golden Notebook (1962).

All these novels, apart from Retreat to Innocence, represent an integral whole that covers her career as a novelist up to 1969 and they point to changes in her career after 1970. The novels written after 1970 are of greater interest to the student of psychology and philosophy than to the student of literature. Commenting on the novels of the 1970's Paul Schlueter says:

Doris Lessing departs radically from anything else she has ever written in several major ways, although the same dominant themes of mental imbalance and psychic phenomena emphasized in The Golden Notebook and the last of the Martha Quest novels are to be found here ... Mrs. Lessing seems intent on probing more and more deeply and relentlessly into the inner-most recesses of the human experience, to move away from the political and social novels of two decades ago into a virtually unexplored territory; into profound explorations of the areas of human experience that ultimately are the most difficult to handle ... Mrs. Lessing calls this new work "inner-space fiction", an attempt to probe beneath the layers of social pretense and the facade of conventionality that so often is a substitute for a deeper reality ... ⁷

It would have been impossible to deal in this thesis with all Mrs. Lessing's works; therefore the first stage of the novel-writing has been chosen - that is, the eight novels that were published between 1950 and 1970. Strict adherence to chronological order has been attempted but as the Children of Violence form a unity, The Golden Notebook - which in order of publication intervenes between the quintet - had to be transferred to a chapter of its own. In the analysis of each novel, or series of novels, they were seen to constitute a whole wherein form and content were one. Each chapter examines both aspects as complementing and reinforcing each other, and deals first with technique and style then leads to a thematic study, pointing out the repetition of the basic themes which are of paramount interest to their author.

⁷Paul Schlueter, The Novels of Doris Lessing (Cross Currents Modern Critiques: Southern Illinois University Press; U.S.A., 1974) pp. 119 - 124.

A brief survey of her work shows how the settings and concerns of Mrs. Lessing's books have gradually shifted since her move to England.

Her first novel, The Grass is Singing (1950), set in Rhodesia, begins with the murder of a white woman by her black servant on a lonely farm, and then goes on to detail, in an extended flashback, the development of their relationship. "Mrs. Lessing has vividly recorded the strong impact of society upon the individual; in adapting to it on one level of his personality and rejecting it on another, he is fragmented, driven to confused and contradictory action."⁹

Mrs. Lessing has stated that Children of Violence "is a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective".¹⁰ Together these five novels chronicle the history of Martha Quest from adolescence, as she grows up, is twice married and divorced, becomes a Communist, lives through World War II, and tries to work for African liberation. The first four volumes are set in Rhodesia (Zambesia in the novels), but at the end of the fourth volume, Martha is ready to sail to England. The fifth book is set mainly in London, though an "Appendix" takes the narrative on until 1997, the year before Martha's death on an island off the Scottish Coast, many years after some great disaster has destroyed Britain.

⁹Ellen Brooks, Fragmentation and Integration: A Study of Doris Lessing's Fiction (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis; New York University, 1971), p. 6.

¹⁰Doris Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", A Small Personal Voice, ed. Paul Schlueter (Vintage Books; New York: Random House, 1975), p. 14.

Many of the characters are involved with the great events of the 20th Century, but they are also steeped in everyday life. Through their multi-dimensional lives, Mrs. Lessing links the disparate material of her fiction, swinging wide in vast historical upheavals but also examining in detail the psychic upheavals of disturbed individuals, implying that neurosis is inevitable in these times.¹¹

The first novel set in England is Retreat to Innocence (1956). It tells of the encounter and parting between an educated but politically apathetic English girl, Julia Barr, and an older Czechoslovak Communist, Jan Brod. Of Julia Barr and those like her, Mrs. Lessing has said:

The mental climate created by the cold war has produced a generation of young intellectuals who totally reject everything communism stands for; they cut themselves off imaginatively from a third of mankind, and impoverish themselves by doing so.¹²

One of Mrs. Lessing's most ambitious works is The Golden Notebook (1962), a work which tries to find some way of integrating the different roles and personalities of Anna Wulf, novelist, Communist, free woman, mother, friend, and lover. It is structurally more complex than the Martha Quest series but deals essentially with the same themes, though as Anna is a writer, there is the additional concern with the artist and the difficulties of artistic creation in the contemporary world. Anna writes of her activities in four separate notebooks; there are also five "Free Women" sections about Anna and her friend

¹¹Ellen Brooks, Fragmentation and Integration, p. 6.

¹²Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", p. 14.

Molly, which together form a conventional novel, and a final golden notebook in which she tries to integrate her experience. Hilton Kramer has judged The Golden Notebook as the one novel of the 60's to "embody the collision of history and private consciousness which art - and only art - can present in all its dialectical complexity".¹³

Mrs. Lessing's plays and poems are less distinguished but two books of reportage, as well as a number of reviews, interviews and articles, help to throw light on her concerns, and make an interesting comment on her fiction. Going Home is a collection of essays describing a visit to the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1956, after which she was declared a prohibited immigrant. In Pursuit of the English describes in slightly fictionalized form Mrs. Lessing's own early experiences in London, living among the working classes in an overcrowded boarding house.

Many critics have generally tried to characterize Doris Lessing as a "committed" writer, and her own articles on both writing and politics show that she would not object to the claim by James Gordin that she is "intensely committed to the active persuasion to reform society".¹⁴

Mrs. Lessing herself makes the most complete statement about her position in "The Small Personal Voice".

¹³Hilton Kramer, New Leader (25 October, 1965), p. 21.

¹⁴James Gordin, "Lessing's Intense Commitment", Postwar British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes (Berckley, 1962), p. 65.

Though Mrs. Lessing was a member of the Communist Party until after the abortive Hungarian revolt and the Twentieth Congress in 1956, yet she declares that her commitment is not to any one political ideology but to the idea of humanity. Her greatest concern is the relationship between the individual and the collective, the individual and society. She believes that the novel is

the only popular art form left where the artist speaks directly, in clear words, to his audience ... The novelist talks as an individual to individuals in a small personal voice.¹⁷

The novelist who accepts his responsibility to communicate with his readers must have "a vision to build towards, and that vision must spring from the nature of the world we live in".¹⁸ Mrs. Lessing's own world view is sombre.

We are living at a time which is so dangerous, violent, explosive and precarious that it is a question whether soon there will be people left alive to write books and to read them.¹⁹

But the splitting of the atom, which on the one hand led to the menacing fear and horror of the hydrogen bomb, was also a revolutionary advance. It made possible great dreams as well as great nightmares and the artist has a responsibility to explore both.

Artists are the traditional interpreters of dreams and nightmares, and this is no time to turn our backs on our chosen responsibilities,

¹⁷Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", p. 21.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁹Ibid.

measured by his capacity to shoulder work and responsibilities he detests, which bore him, which are too small for what he could be; a man whose strength will not be gauged by the values of the mystique of suffering.

The imagination of the world already rejects hunger and poverty. We all believe they can be abolished. If humanity submits to living below the level of what is possible, it will be as shameful as when a human being chooses to live below the level of what he can be; or a nation falls below itself.²³

Modern writers in general, Mrs. Lessing claims, have failed to present their visions of what the world could be, mainly because of their preoccupation with death, fear and suffering, with actualities and not potentialities. The old Utopias have not been rewritten, and nobility is almost always shown as victory over suffering.

The best and most vital works of Western literature have been despairing statements of emotional anarchy ... the novel or play which one sees or reads with a shudder of horrified pity for all of humanity.²⁴

Mrs. Lessing believes that writers like Camus, Beckett, Sartre, Genet apparently feel nothing but a "tired pity" for their fellow humans, and that their work is therefore a betrayal of the writer's true task. Though she recognizes the artistic superiority of their work, she is forced to reject their vision of art and life, along with that of many minor and naive socialist writers who produce cheerful tracts about factory workers and collective farmers.

Both are aspects of cowardice, both fallings - away from a central vision, the two easy escapes of our time into false innocence. They are opposite sides of the same coin. One sees

²³Ibid., pp. 8 - 9.

²⁴Ibid., p. 11.

the question of what is due to the collective and what is due to the individual. The question is debated many times in her novels: it is never fully solved.

Mrs. Lessing, writing in the realist tradition, aims to describe the world as it is. She therefore must describe violence, war, racial tension, inhumanity, and frustration for these are the realities of our time. But her realism includes more than the accurate reproduction of contemporary events. She defines realism as "an art which springs so vigorously and naturally from a strongly-held though not necessarily intellectually-defined view of life that it absorbs symbolism".²⁸ As F.W.P. McDowell has explained, the "symbols are only incidental, but all the more powerful and evocative by being embedded organically in the work itself".²⁹ Mrs. Lessing has already explained her own stance; it depends on a sense of balance and detachment. The realistic novelist, then, is one who sees man's capacities for becoming truly human, as well as noting the conflict and violence man produces. He is the man who describes both the dream and the nightmare.

Georg Lukacs in his essay "Historical Truth in Fiction", says:

Realism is not some sort of middle way between false objectivity and false subjectivity ... Realism is the recognition of the fact that the work of literature can rest neither on a

²⁸Ibid., p. 4.

²⁹Frederick W.P. McDowell, "The Fiction of Doris Lessing. An Interim View", Arizona Quarterly 21 (Winter 1965), p. 316.