

Fiction and Narrative: A Study of Doris Lessing's "Memoirs of a Survivor"

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Abstract: African literature is replete with the contribution made by the writers of both genders. The women writers whose works raged a stormy controversy across the globe continued to be firm in their stand to defend their philosophy and approach to life. Doris Lessing is no exception to this. Despite her bitter experiences in life, Lessing had to accept what circumstances offered to her, her compulsive marriage and her inevitable acceptance of her motherhood. She had an unhappy childhood too. She commented that unhappy childhoods seem to produce fiction writers. She believes that she was freer than most people because she became a writer. She took to full time writing in 1949 and produced fiction and short stories of rare kind. The writers of this paper have tried to interpret her works with a particular reference to "MEMOIRS OF A SURVIVOR".

Keywords: Fiction, Narrative, Bitter memories, Pretty neurotic

1. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing was born to Doris May Tayler in Persia (now Iran) on October 22, 1919. Both of her parents were British: her father, who had been crippled in World War I, was a clerk in the Imperial Bank of Persia; her mother had been a nurse. In 1925, lured by the promise of getting rich through maize farming, the family moved to the British colony in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Doris's mother adapted to the rough life in the settlement, energetically trying to reproduce what was, in her view, a civilized, Edwardian life among savages; but her father did not, and the thousand-odd acres of bush he had bought failed to yield the promised wealth.

Lessing has described her childhood as an uneven mix of some pleasure and much pain. The natural world, which she explored with her brother, Harry, was one retreat from an otherwise miserable existence. Her mother, obsessed with raising a proper daughter, enforced a rigid system of rules and hygiene at home, and then installed Doris in a convent school, where nuns terrified their children with stories of hell and damnation. Lessing was later sent to an all-girls high school in the capital of Salisbury, from which she soon dropped out. She was thirteen; and it was the end of her formal education.

But like other women writers from southern African who did not graduate from high school (such as Olive Schreiner and Nadine Gordimer), Lessing made herself into a self-educated intellectual. She recently commented that unhappy childhoods seem to produce fiction writers. Lessing's early reading included Dickens, Scott, Stevenson, Kipling; later she discovered D.H. Lawrence, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky. Bedtime stories also nurtured her youth: her mother told the children and Doris herself kept her younger brother awake, spinning out tales. Doris's early years were also spent absorbing her father's bitter memories of World War I, taking them in as a kind of poison.

In flight from her mother, Lessing left home when she was fifteen and took a job as a nursemaid. Her employer gave her books on politics and sociology to read, while his brother-in-law crept into her bed at night and gave her inept kisses. During that time she was, Lessing has written, "in a fever of erotic longing." Frustrated by her backward suitor, she indulged in elaborate romantic fantasies. She was also writing stories, and sold them to magazines in South Africa.

Lessing's life has been a challenge to her belief that people cannot resist the currents of their time, as she fought against the biological and cultural imperatives that fated her to sink without a murmur into marriage and motherhood. "There is a whole generation of women," she has said, speaking of her mother's era, "and it was as if their lives came to a stop when they had children. Most of them got pretty neurotic - because, I think, of the contrast between what they were taught at school they were capable of being and what actually happened to them." Lessing believes that she was freer than most people because she became a writer. For her, writing is a process of "setting at a distance," taking the "raw, the individual, the uncriticized, the unexamined, into the realm of the general."

In 1937 she moved to Salisbury, where she worked as a telephone operator for a year. At nineteen, she married Frank Wisdom, and had two children. A few years later, feeling trapped in a persona that she feared would destroy her, she left her family, remaining in Salisbury. Soon she was drawn to the like-minded members of the Left Book Club, a group of Communists "who read everything, and who did not think it remarkable to read." Gottfried Lessing was a central member of the group; shortly after she joined, they married and had a son.

During the postwar years, Lessing became increasingly disillusioned with the Communist movement, which she left altogether in 1954. By 1949, Lessing had moved to London with her young son. That year, she also published her first novel, "The Grass Is Singing", and began her career as a professional writer.

2. ANALYSIS

Features of Lessing's Fiction

Lessing's fiction is commonly divided into three distinct phases: the Communist theme (1944–56), when she was writing radically on social issues (to which she returned in *The Good Terrorist* [1985]); the psychological theme (1956–1969); and after that the Sufi theme, which was explored in the Canopus in Argos sequence of science fiction (or as she preferred to put it "space fiction") novels and novellas. Doris Lessing's first novel *The Grass Is Singing*, the first four volumes of *The Children of Violence* sequence, as well as the collection of short stories *African Stories* are set in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Lessing's Canopus sequence was not popular with many mainstream literary critics. For example, in the *New York Times* in 1982 John Leonard wrote in reference to *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* that "[o]ne of the many sins for which the 20th century will be held accountable is that it has discouraged Mrs. Lessing... She now propagandises on behalf of our insignificance in the cosmic razzmatazz," to which Lessing replied: "What they didn't realize was that in science fiction is some of the best social fiction of our time. I also admire the classic sort of science fiction, like *Blood Music*, by Greg Bear. He's a great writer." Unlike some authors primarily known for their mainstream work, she never hesitated to admit that she wrote science fiction and attended the 1987 World Science Fiction Convention as its Writer Guest of Honor. Here she made a speech in which she described her dystopian novel *Memoirs of a Survivor* as "an attempt at an autobiography."

The Canopus in Argos novels present an advanced interstellar society's efforts to accelerate the evolution of other worlds, including Earth. Using Sufi concepts, to which Lessing had been introduced in the mid-1960s by her "good friend and teacher" Idries Shah, the series of novels also utilizes an approach similar to that employed by the early 20th century mystic G. I. Gurdjieff in his work *All and Everything*. Earlier works of "inner space" fiction like *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) and *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) also connect to this theme. Lessing's interest had turned to Sufism after coming to the realisation that Marxism ignored spiritual matters, leaving her disillusioned.

Lessing's novel, "The Golden Notebook", is considered a feminist classic by some scholars, but notably not by the author herself, who later wrote that its theme of mental breakdowns as a means of healing and freeing one's self from illusions had been overlooked by critics. She also regretted that critics failed to appreciate the exceptional structure of the novel. She explained in, "Walking in the Shade", that she modeled Molly partly on her good friend Joan Rodker, the daughter of the modernist poet and publisher John Rodker.

Lessing's fiction is deeply autobiographical, much of it emerging out of her experiences in Africa. Drawing upon her childhood memories and her serious engagement with politics and social concerns, Lessing has written about the clash of cultures, the gross injustices of racial inequality, the struggle among opposing elements within an individual's own personality, and the conflict between the individual conscience and the collective good. Her stories and novellas set in Africa, published during the fifties and early sixties, decry the dispossession of black Africans by white colonials, and expose the sterility of the white culture in southern Africa. In 1956, in response to Lessing's courageous outspokenness, she was declared a prohibited alien in both Southern Rhodesia and South Africa.

3. DISCUSSION

Thematical Study of "Memoirs of a Survivor"

The Memoirs of a Survivor is a dystopian novel by Nobel Prize-winner Doris Lessing. It was first published in 1974 by Octagon Press. It was made into a film in 1981, starring Julie Christie and Nigel Hawthorne, and directed by David Gladwell. The story takes place in a near-future Britain where society has broken down due to an unspecified disaster. Family units themselves have broken down and survivors band together into loose units for basic survival.

The unnamed narrator ends up with 'custody' of a teenage girl named Emily Cartwright. Emily herself has unspecified trauma in her past that the main character does not probe at. Hugo, an odd mix of cat and dog, comes with Emily. Due to the growing scarcity of resources, the animal is in constant danger of being eaten.

Periodically, the narrator is able, through meditating on a certain wall in her flat, to traverse space and time. Many of these visions are about Emily's sad childhood under the care of her harsh father and distant mother. At the end of the novel, the main character's strange new family breaks through dimensional barriers via the wall, and walks into a much better world.

Concept and creation

Author Doris Lessing says this novel grew out of a "very hubristic" ambition to write an autobiography in dreams. "Doris Lessing is not afraid to break through the barrier separating the mainstream from the fantastic, to let go of man's world," writes Marleen S. Barr in her essay in *A Companion to Science Fiction*. She argues that feminist science fiction novels such as "Memoirs of a Survivor" provide an alternate viewpoint that "dissolve walls that imprison women within a sexist reality." However, the warping of space and time presented in this novel led scholar Betsy Draine to label it a "failure", saying the shifts between realistic and mystical frames are impossible to follow. The *New York Review of Books* felt the ending, in which Emily leads the other main characters through the walls into another reality, was "reminiscent of a Technicolor fade-out into the sunset."

The *New York Times* wrote, "Lessing's message, recognizable from her previous work, is close to W. H. Auden's 'We must love one another or die.'" Although we will inevitably be defeated and disillusioned, we still need to care about other people. Consciousness becomes a physical boundary represented by the wall of the narrator's home: "the rooms and garden beyond it are areas of the unconscious which she explores." The mystical dimension is given the author's tacit approval when she allows the principal characters to escape the dystopian reality by passing through the wall.

Another theme is that of breakdown, both of mechanized Western culture and of adult, mechanical personality.

Over the years, Lessing has attempted to accommodate what she admires in the novels of the nineteenth century - their "climate of ethical judgment" - to the demands of twentieth-century ideas about consciousness and time. After writing the *Children of Violence* series (1951-1959), a formally conventional bildungsroman (novel of education) about the growth in consciousness of her heroine, Martha Quest, Lessing broke new ground with *The Golden Notebook* (1962), a daring narrative experiment, in which the multiple selves of a contemporary woman are rendered

in astonishing depth and detail. Anna Wulf, like Lessing herself, strives for ruthless honesty as she aims at freeing herself from the chaos, emotional numbness, and hypocrisy afflicting her generation.

Attacked for being "unfeminine" in her depiction of female anger and aggression, Lessing responded, "Apparently what many women were thinking, feeling, experiencing came as a great surprise." As at least one early critic noticed, Anna Wulf "tries to live with the freedom of a man" - a point Lessing seems to confirm: "These attitudes in male writers were taken for granted, accepted as sound philosophical bases, as quite normal, certainly not as woman-hating, aggressive, or neurotic."

In the 1970s and 1980s, Lessing began to explore more fully the quasi-mystical insight Anna Wulf seems to reach by the end of "The Golden Notebook". Her "inner-space fiction" deals with cosmic fantasies (Briefing for a "Descent into Hell", 1971), dreamscapes and other dimensions (Memoirs of a Survivor, 1974), and science fiction probing of higher planes of existence (Canopus in Argos: Archives, 1979-1983). These reflect Lessing's interest, since the 1960s, in Idries Shah, whose writings on Sufi mysticism stress the evolution of consciousness and the belief that individual liberation can come about only if people understand the link between their own fates and the fate of society.

Lessing's other novels include *The Good Terrorist* (1985) and *The Fifth Child* (1988); she also published two novels under the pseudonym Jane Somers (*The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, 1983 and *If the Old Could...*, 1984). In addition, she has written several nonfiction works, including books about cats, a love since childhood. *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography*, to 1949 appeared in 1995 and received the James Tait Black Prize for best biography.

4. CONCLUSION

In June 1995 she received an Honorary Degree from Harvard University. Also in 1995, she visited South Africa to see her daughter and grandchildren, and to promote her autobiography. It was her first visit since being forcibly removed in 1956 for her political views. Ironically, she is welcomed now as a writer acclaimed for the very topics for which she was banished 40 years ago. She collaborated with illustrator Charlie Adlard to create the unique and unusual graphic novel, *Playing the Game*. After being out of print in the U.S. for more than 30 years, *Going Home* and *In Pursuit of the English* were republished by HarperCollins in 1996. These two fascinating and important books give rare insight into Mrs. Lessing's personality, life and views.

In 1996, her first novel in 7 years, "Love Again", was published by HarperCollins. She did not make any personal appearances to promote the book. In an interview she describes the frustration she felt during a 14-week worldwide tour to promote her autobiography: "I told my publishers it would be far more useful for everyone if I stayed at home, writing another book. But they wouldn't listen. This time round I stamped my little foot and said I would not move from my house and would do only one interview." And the honors keep on coming: she was on the list of nominees for the Nobel Prize for Literature and Britain's Writer's Guild Award for Fiction in 1996.

Late in the year, HarperCollins published *Play with A Tiger and Other Plays*, a compilation of 3 of her plays: *Play with a Tiger*, *The Singing Door* and *Each His Own Wilderness*. In an unexplained move, Harper Collins only published this volume in the U.K. and it is not available in the U.S., to the disappointment of her North American readers.

In 1997 she collaborated with Philip Glass for the second time, providing the libretto for the opera "The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five" which premiered in Heidelberg, Germany in May. *Walking in the Shade*, the anxiously awaited second volume of her autobiography was published in October and was nominated for the 1997 National Book Critics Circle Award in the biography/autobiography category. This volume documents her arrival in England in 1949 and takes us up to the publication of *The Golden Notebook*. This is the final volume of her autobiography, she will not be writing a third volume.

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