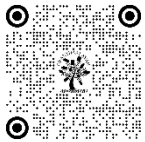


QUEST FOR CONSCIOUSNESS: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF DORIS LESSING

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ABSTRACT

One of the significant problems confronting the contemporary world is the total absence of meaningful relationships. Disquiet and vexation in relations arise because of an individual's constant encounter with the mores and customs of society. Owing to grave social inequities permeating society, human minds experience growing resentment. Gender difference is one of the greatest malaise which plunges women into the mire of negotiations made by a patriarchal society. The women's struggle against a male ideology condemning them to virtual silence and docility has been a constant phenomenon. The dominant problem of a woman's relationship between society and the unconscious remains unresolved. It is in this context that Doris Lessing's works gain prominence as she provides solutions through her protagonists who survive the crisis of "cracking up" and ultimately emerge as a new entity. Her protagonists are enmeshed in their enigmatic mental make-up inhibiting them from establishing personal or social relationships. They try to adapt themselves to the phallogocentric society repressing their hedonistic desires and contorting their personality. Usually, women with extra sensory perception are labelled as insane and misfits in a patriarchal society favouring the less intelligent and the more obedient. The paper attempts to explore the inherent reasons for the acute desolation experienced by women, their seemingly contorted personalities and the prevailing crisis in their relation with others and how women re-conceptualise and redefine the established patterns of relational dynamics. The paper aims to critically examine in Lessing's semi-autobiographical sequence, *Children of Violence*, the skewed ways in which the female mind expresses feelings and the strategic method by which the self is relocated through interaction with the familial and socio-cultural environment by applying advanced psychoanalytic theories propounded by Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, Julia Kristeva, R.D. Laing, Lacan, etc.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, consciousness, fragmented self, non-conformity, individualism

1. INTRODUCTION

It becomes quite mandatory for every individual born into the world to be entangled in the inevitable knots of relations. The moment one enters into the intricate bonds of relationships she/he tends to be bridled by the forces of assimilation. Life has always offered flamboyant colours and a constant array of multiple options. Every individual self is engaged in the perpetual process of recreating the self, Relinquishing the idea of occupying the same place for a longer duration, thus steered towards the goal of achieving an authentic self. The innate desire of a child to establish a relationship could be construed as its craving for development in society. It recognizes the unavoidable fact that a social form of existence is imperative for survival and that growth cannot be achieved in isolation. Hence dependence on other beings in the external world is necessitated right from the infant stage. The absolute dependence of infants on their parents broadens their reliance on culture, political order, social codes, law, etc. Gripped by the sole objective of survival, an individual involuntarily partakes in the process of differentiation from the environment and other objects and also initiates cooperative relationships with differentiated objects. Thus an individual gets enchanted ultimately into the complexities of relations. The interdependence of society and individuals is a predominant reality acknowledged in the pages of history. No one can ever ignore the fact that the mores and the customs of society are closely related to the different forms of behaviour of an individual. It is worth mentioning that a society makes or unmakes an individual.

In the realm of history, political, ideological or social turbulence and its repercussions on human lives have been regarded as universal phenomena which owe greatly to the mindset of the individuals. Thus the human psyche becomes very relevant and many interlocking theories regarding the functioning of the psyche have been harped on by various psychoanalysts. Michel Foucault, the French intellectual, has rightly assessed that power is inherent in all social relations. It is this power struggle that creates the base for a decisive hierarchical order. Simultaneously the male gains prominence in the social hierarchy leaving the female discontented with the existing power structure. Thus the patriarchal society becomes detrimental to the growth of a woman and women are enfeebled into passive acquiescence. A woman's persistent quest for one's consciousness often culminates in mental agony and the ubiquitous quality of fragmentation in self. This growing conflict within one's self leads to desolation and ennui and finally causes mental aberrations in a woman. One's failure to create an identity in outer space leads one to find a space in the inner mindscape. The differing experiences of emotional turmoil have been recorded and hypothesised by various psychoanalysts creating a reservoir of knowledge.

The variety and the complexity in the mental makeup of individuals have always created an unceasing influence in the literary realm, kindling interest among literary luminaries. The psychoanalytic approach to literary texts has been a favourite subject of many literary geniuses and Doris Lessing was no exception to it. She has been one of the most articulated advocates of the application of psychoanalysis in literature. She dealt with profound regard, the intricacies of human relations and the queer ways in which human beings react to the external forces in her writings. She was endowed with an amazing talent to divulge the intriguing workings of the human psyche through her fictitious characters. Her works have always succeeded in holding the readers rapt attention and carrying them through shambolic patterns of mindscape with occasional mental perturbations culminating in enlightened experience. An exploratory journey through the intricate passages of the mind of the characters offers the readers both the knowledge about the complex operation of the mind and the power to examine ambivalence within an individual's psyche enabling them to divert tragic disasters in their own life. Her iconoclastic approach to narrative and genre earned her great adulation among other prominent writers. Her writings gain prominence as they display feminine sensibility and the changing destiny of women. She is known to be a radical exponent of psychoanalysis interpreting and examining human behaviour and its relation with the outer world. Lessing satirises the familiar tendencies seen among the public to label neurotic symptoms like phobias, panic, obsessions, depression, and compulsions as 'madness'. According to her the mental aberrations shown among a few people are an indication of their inherent potential to have intuitive insights. Lessing through her works probes into the various convoluted social issues and alerts her readers to the perpetuating injustices in society.

Her novels always secured a unique place in the literary realm by being innovative, vivacious, engaging and critically acclaimed. A deep reading of her works can be regarded as a crucial form of self-perception and self-analysis. Her novels are regarded as the finest expressions of detachment experienced by women from society. A complete sense of loss is experienced by her characters in their desperate attempt to locate identities in society. Her novels examine the profound issue of a woman's position in the current complicated society. The object relations theory which attempts to discuss the vicissitudes of human relationships through a study of internal representations of self and others can be applied to Lessing's intriguing characters. Her protagonists seem to undergo continual strife within the family and also within the state. The common aspect that features all the major works of Lessing is the journey through different levels of consciousness. Some works focus on individual consciousness including the inner and spiritual progress of the individual and some others focus on the collective consciousness encompassing all human beings in the universe. In the sequence, *Children of Violence*, the individual conscience is examined in its relations with the collective conscience.

Children of Violence is a five-part bildungsroman comprising *Martha Quest*, *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, *Landlocked* and *The Four Gated City*. This semi-autobiographical sequence chronicles the journey of Martha Quest, the protagonist, against a twentieth-century backdrop through different phases of her life ultimately driving her towards nonconformity and individualism. The sequence portrays the development of a rebellious young Rhodesian girl, Martha, through the different levels of consciousness. Lessing describes the sequence as "a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective". The sequence as a whole delineates the friction caused by violent children in their relationship with their elders, among themselves and with the society. Martha endowed with extraordinary intelligence and passion is brought up amidst the resentments and differences shared between her parents. Overwhelmed by the tension experienced within the family, she resorts to books for direction and survival. This specific deviation from her parents can find a prominent place in Erikson's theory which discusses the complex development of a child's personality due to the lack of proper parental care and attention. Martha's thoughts are focused on complete emancipation from the conformist institution around her. Unable to convince her family of her lofty ideals, she makes

the ultimate decision to leave them with the hope of seeking freedom in fresher pastures. In the constant pursuit of emancipation, she navigates every new phase anticipating life to be freer than former ones. But her confrontation with new experiences never accomplishes her desire; rather it remains as a vision gnawing at her, making the freedom envisaged by Martha a sheer illusion. She becomes prey to what R D Laing calls 'ontological insecurity' which prevents her from forming successful intimate relationships. She refuses to become engulfed by other powerful persons since she perceives their intervention in her life as a threat to her identity. Martha's craving for emancipation from the clutches of her mother can be related to the 'abjection theory' propounded by Julia Kristeva. Mother is rejected by her as something repugnant or abject in her strivings to locate a subjective position in the patriarchal 'symbolic' domain.

The dissatisfaction pervading the life of Martha can be psychologically analysed in terms of the 'collective unconscious' forwarded by Carl Jung. The relationship with her mother raises her doubts about the concept of 'mothering'. This suggests her mother's inaptness to satisfy the demands of the archetypal mother as conceived by Martha. Her journey begins with a careful examination of the concept of motherhood and love. Martha's annoyance with her mother's vain attempts to strictly adhere to conventions becomes evident when she, in the opening of the novel, shocks her mother by reading a popular sex book by Havelock Ellis against the social code of conduct. She is also distracted by a gnawing sense of sympathy for her mother who leads a self-denying life serving every other person in the family. Martha's desire for freedom can be equated with the desire for 'Other' in Lacanian theory. She is gripped with an overwhelming sense of 'lack' which motivates her to seek the ideal of freedom to fill in the gap. It dawns on her that her existence as a human subject becomes a reality only when she is recognised by society. The notions of Heinz Kohut on 'self-object' also become relevant here. Martha in her exploration of freedom gets impatient and goes through psychic conflicts but can surpass all the distressing moments of life on account of the 'self-object' resonating in her. It is through the experience of encounter with the 'self-object' that she manages to restore her fragmented self to vitality.

The emphatic urge in her to lead an independent life reflects the traits discussed by Erikson in his interpretation of the adolescent stage of human life. Martha acts as a typical teenager when she moves Around with her friends attending late-night parties but on the other hand, she becomes a visionary idealist as she contemplates on social issues like racism, gender roles, and the dominance of one society over another, the influence of modern thinking on established tradition, etc. The psychological rift between the visionary and the ordinary becomes the main cause of her perpetual agony. The exuberance of youth manifested in the character of Martha can be analysed in terms of the dynamics of the psyche elucidated by Jung. In his view, the intense clash between the opposing forces in one's mind creates energy or 'libido' of the psyche which is called the 'principle of opposites'. This power is more conspicuous in youths, making them respond to all discrepancies in the world, leading them to loathe the existing gender differences and finally assert their identity. This probably is one of the reasons why Martha becomes disillusioned when she fails to assert her identity as a 'woman' in the patriarchal world. Nevertheless, she regains the power of the youth to balance her ideas and beliefs with the realities of adult life. This inconsistency in her character owes to the 'principle of opposite'. Martha is introduced in the novel as an adolescent blessed with an 'extra-sensory perception' with, as Jung calls it, a 'teleological' functioning of the mind. Her visionary power is exemplified by Lessing when she introduces Martha as having a vision of a city on the veld:

and its citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together and these groups of elders paused, and smiled with pleasure at the site of the children- the blue-eyed, fair-skinned children of the North playing hand in hand with the bronze-skinned, dark-eyed children of the South. Yes, they smiled and approved these many fathered children, running and playing among the flowers and the terraces, through the white pillars and tall trees of this fabulous and ancient city.. . (21)

The novel as a whole records the intellectual and spiritual awakening of Martha on leaving her insular parental farm. The next novel in the sequence, *A Proper Marriage*, details the social pressures persuading Martha both to marry and to maintain a conventional role in the married life. A highly intelligent and unconventional woman is inserted into the most conventional institute like marriage and the repercussions of the same are recorded in the novel. It begins in the initial days of her married life with Douglas Knowell when Martha perceives herself as being ensnared in her husband's new apartment both mentally and physically. She is being completely shut off from social life except for her regular night visits to the sundowner parties accompanied by Knowell. At the parties, she puts on what Laing terms 'persona' to be her different self. In the daytime within the confines of the apartment, her rebellious temperament intensifies leading her to despise herself. Threatened by the claustrophobic setting at home Martha desperately tries to grapple with the world outside to give purpose to her life and escape from a fragmentation in the self. She is least enamoured by the

obsequious role of a wife offered to her as it turns out to be contrary to her lofty ideals of marriage. A deep felt concern is shown by Martha to liberate herself from the institutionalised marriage owing to the 'ontological insecurity'.

Martha is further perplexed about her role as a mother when the 'creature' as referred to by Martha is born whom she perceives as another threat to her freedom. She is unable to act on the intuitive feelings of the emotional bond between a mother and a child. The 'mother archetype', as discussed in Jungian theory, wavers in her. She develops a philosophy of her own on child-rearing in which detachment from children is regarded as wise for their independent full growth without pressures and expectations of love. At the same time, she ponders over the role of 'woman' as devised in literature:

Or do you suppose they didn't tell the truth, the novelists? In the books, the young and idealistic girl gets married, and has a baby- she at once turns into something quite different, and she is perfectly happy to spend her whole life bringing up children with a tedious husband. Natasha, for instance [in War and Peace]: she was content to be an old hen, fussing and dull; but supposing all the time she saw a picture of herself as she had been, and saw herself as what she had become and was miserable- what then? Because either that's the truth or there is a completely new kind of woman in the world, and surely that isn't possible... (268)

Sexual ambivalence finds a special place in the novel. When she fails to create an identity of her own in the family she explores the forbidden realms of sex. In the absence of Douglas, the dark side of the ego or as Jung names it the 'shadow' begins to work its spell on her. The realm of sex is sought by her as a strategy to seek freedom. The absence of her husband becomes a turning point in her life when she seeks new grounds to satisfy her political interest. The latent potential of an intellectual woman is ignited through her participation in the Communist meetings. At this stage, as Erikson puts it, she becomes intensely aware of her 'generativity' as a social being. To put an end to her chaotic situation she makes a heart-rending choice of Communism deserting her child and husband. As domestic life fails to offer her security she embarks on a journey to assert her identity through political interventions. Hence, till the end of this novel, Martha remains as a woman battling passions and visions waiting to decipher her identity in other realms.

In *A Ripple from the Storm*, Martha's attempts to actualise herself through an active involvement in Communism are discussed. Initially, on joining the Communist group she feels ecstatic about finding a like-minded group. Martha easily adapts to the group as it questions the rigid rules of society and her rebellious temperament attunes well with the rebellious group organised against the society. The novel though emphasises the social ideologies and does not deviate much from the emphatic theme of Martha's growing consciousness as a woman. After the severance from Knowell, she reflects on her present Predicament is meaningless to the conventional depiction of women. She ironically explores the language of a romantic novel:

There is a type of woman who can never be, as they are likely to put it 'themselves', with anyone but the man to whom they have permanently or not given their hearts. If the man goes away there is left a space filled with shadows. She mourns for the temporarily extinct person she can only be with a man she loves; she mourns him who brought her 'self' to life. She lives with the space at her side, peopled with the images of her potentialities until the next man walks into the space, absorbs the shadows into himself, creating her, allowing her to be her 'self a new self, since it is his conception which forms her. (54-55)

This initiates her to find a mate to fill in the apparent vacuity in her life. To confirm her subjective position in society she marries the most vibrant person in the Communist group Anton Hesse, a German immigrant and the leader of the group. The novel discusses the internal argument and the naiveties of the group in a sweltering atmosphere. The heated discussions reveal the psychological anxieties of a group as well as an individual. The persistent struggle of the group to be identified as a separate body is displayed but Martha finally discovers the group is insensible. She is jolted by the sudden recognition that this institution with all its rigid and orthodox Marxian rules is in no way different from other conventional institutions. The development in Martha's consciousness becomes evident when she has a different vision of the city unlike the vision she had as an adolescent which is described in the passage:

A small ragged, barefooted black child, pot-bellied with malnutrition, hesitated on the opposite corner... Martha and Jasmine smiled at each other, saying in the smile that because of them, because of their vision, he was protected and saved: the future they dreamed of seemed just around the corner; they could almost touch it. Each saw an ideal town, clean, noble and beautiful, soaring up over the actual town they saw, which consisted in this area of sordid little shops and third-rate cafes. The ragged child was already a citizen of this ideal town, co-citizen with themselves; they watched him out of sight around the corner smiling: it was as if they had touched him with their hands in friendship. (40)

The novel as a whole records the intelligent reactions and comments made by the growing Martha. Landlocked, gives an account of Martha making more inward explorations of herself. The social groups stop kindling interest in her and the marriage with Anton soon dissolves. The sterility of their married life is discussed as '...they made a civilised arrangement about marriage when it was not a

success, and lived together like brother and sister, sharing single beds in a small bedroom' (142). In the desperate situation, Martha seeks a new tie with Thomas Stern who satisfies her, both physically and mentally, to a greater extent than any other man in her life. Martha's explorations of the psyche during her sexual interactions with Thomas Stern and Anton are sketched well in the novel. After the first lovemaking with Thomas Stern, she is forced to have sex with Anton. At this juncture, her intra-psychic conflicts are reflected in the lines:

Who, then, was this person in Martha who first of all signalled to her husband, her legal possessor (or some kind of possessor) that she had been unfaithful to him, and who then went on (without Martha knowing about it, let alone sanctioning it) to signal invitations to him, because apparently, she had to buy this disliked husbands compliance, even forgiveness. And by offering him her sex! (141)

The love relationship with Thomas Stern gives a new dimension to her 'self'. Dreams are given their importance in the novel which describes the internal workings of the unconscious. Martha finds her dreams connecting her to the remote unconscious. Her repressed desires to possess Thomas Stern find an outlet in the form of dreams. Her reflections on the same are given in the passage:

Once upon a time, so it is said, people listened to their dreams as if bending to a door beyond which great figures moved; half-human, speaking half-divine truths. But now we wake from sleep as if our fingers have been on a pulse: 'so that's it! That's how matters stand!' Martha's dreams registered a calmly beating pulse, although she knew that loving Thomas must hold its risks and that this was as true for him as for her. (122)

Lessing in this novel, gives a full expression of psychoanalytic theories propounded by Laing with whom she was on close terms discussing theories on the manifold aspects of the state of mind. The temporary psychic division which Martha faces during her exploration of the self can be interpreted as a 'transformative episode' whereby the intense mental rift enables Martha to become wiser and more balanced.

The last volume of *Children of Violence*, *The Four Gated City*, declares an integrity which is attained by Martha in her long journey of consciousness. Martha aimlessly moved about attempting at many jobs before finding a stable job as a secretary to Mark Coldridge, a writer. She also helps Mark in raising his son but is alarmed to discover his wife, Lynda, fated to live in the basement of his apartment on account of her mental illness. The psychological aspects are explored in its complete form in this novel. Martha refuses to categorise Lynda as insane, rather she sees in her a prophet and a mentor. This novel gives an account of how Martha and Coldridge survive a nuclear attack. It is set in Post-war Britain with all the aftermaths of social and political convulsions. The novel announces unity within diversity in its arrangement of post-war experiences. This is elaborated by Ruth Whitaker in her book *Doris Lessing as*, 'the narrative movement is not so much linear as concentric with Martha at the centre of three overlapping worlds: the outside world of politics and wars, the immediate community of the Coldridge family, and the inner world of her expanding consciousness. Doris Lessing shows how these three circles affect one another... (54). Martha's interminable quest for wholeness in the complex post-war situations is magnificently explored in the novel.

The Four Gated City has deftly explored social and cultural issues and the inner space of mind. Martha is excited at the production of space fiction by Jimmy, Mark's scientist partner. Her keen interest in deciphering the source of his plots which were about 'people who had more senses than are considered normal' (392) shows her interest in the intuitive insights. She ruminates on the way Jimmy resolves her curiosity when he says, the ideas are just "in the air"...and goes on to say that "all of us" wrote about such ideas. He then went on to describe a new machine which he was working on that could stimulate or destroy areas of the brain... (392). Though Jimmy possesses terrifying insights he lacks moral responsibility for his ideas. In high contrast to Jimmy's personality, Mark is a person endowed with an integrated self. Mark's attempts to publish his futuristic novel are rejected by publishers who 'said with commendable frankness that they would not publish a communist' (314). But finally, the book is 'taken up by the science fiction addicts... of course, such work was not then taken seriously in literary circles, but he found a way of looking at the world nearer to his own than any other' (314-15).

Through this novel, Lessing satirises the people who despise science-fiction writers for their elevated ideas about future human salvation. Martha in the novel displays an obnoxious tendency towards categorisation.

The Children of Violence traces the development and growth of Martha spending her childhood in Southern Rhodesia as a rebellious young girl battling with various political issues in post-war England emerging as a new entity with a serene outlook on life. Martha recognises the futility of her search for consciousness which she believes is beyond the reach of mankind. Towards the end, she can view life in a more mature way where the 'principle of entropy' works. Martha's journey through her consciousness brings about a radical change in her personality where she rises above all conflicts and achieves a composed mind. Lessing asserts through her novels how the 'non-rational' aspect of the human mind works to perceive the 'self'. As Jung postulates, the characters attained the stage of 'transcendence' when the process of 'self-actualisation' is fulfilled. Martha in her exploration of the 'self' achieves a wholeness when the opposing tendencies of the mind come to a cease and a more balanced position is achieved by the psyche leading to mental integrity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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