

**Doris Lissing's Brief Life Sketch and Her Wanderings - In Relation
to Her Themes and Concerns**

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Abstract

Doris Lessing is the supremely gifted and probably the greatest modernist fiction writer. She is so diverse and enigmatic a writer that the critics over six decades have failed to make a full estimate of her works, which are so passionate and multi-layered that these critics estimate and re-estimate these, works again and again. She was born of British parents at Kermanshah in Persia in 1919, where her father worked as a banker. Her father became disillusioned with his work as banker and had the family to move to a farm in Southern Rhodesia hoping to get rich by farming. This proved a very bad move for the family, as the plan failed; but at the same time, it proved a good move for Doris Lessing who was a chap of six then. Rhodesian adventure had a great store in future for her novels as well as, for the author herself. She joined the Dominican Convent High School, a Roman Catholic Convent all-girls School at Salisbury. According to her own account, she was a rather introverted, imaginative and neurotic child and so she left the school at the age of 13 and was self-educated from then on. Then she left home at 15 and worked as a nurse-maid. There she took to reading the material that her employer gave her on politics

and sociology she began writing around this time within her family, we can rightly say, Doris was a “rebel in residence”. It may be guessed that she had not a happy childhood because of her parents’ financial and psychological struggles. After leaving her job as a nurse-maid, she returned to the farm, where she wrote two novels but thinking them to be too bad, she destroyed them. Returning back Salisbury she began to work as a telephone operator. At Salisbury, she socialized a lot and made a good many friends. Almost all the activities of this period are portrayed in one of her early novels, in which Martha Quest portrays Doris Lessing. It can be safely said that Doris Lessing was developed and formed, physically, as well as, mentally by Africa. Soon she married to Frank Wisdom, who became her first husband with Frank Wisdom, she had two children’s, John and Jean but this marriage ended soon in 1943.

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Her attention was soon drawn to the community around the Left Book Club, an organization she had joined the year before. Here she met her future husband Gottfried Lessing. They married shortly after she joined this organization a son was born to the pair in 1947. She had enough of experience of married life till then and so did not marry again. Besides these legal marriages, Lessing had a love affair with RAF Serviceman John White horn, who was stationed in Southern Rhodesia, and “wrote him ninety letters between 1943 and 1949”. These marriages and these divorces find enough space in the novels of Doris Lessing. We see this young lady in the making of the Doris Lessing, the greatest of the modernist novelists. Lessing moved to London in 1949 along with her youngest son, peter, to pursue her writing career there. In Africa she had seen enough of human miseries which colonialism and colour prejudice had perpetuated there and hence she thought communism the only remedy for such ills. In London, she was also to preach and practice these beliefs in an organized manner. She had left her two elder children with their father, Frank Wisdom, in South Africa, and saw no choice in leaving her children in South Africa; she is frank enough to say, “*There is nothing more forming for an intelligent woman than to spend endless amounts of time with small children. I felt I was not the first person to bring them up. I would have ended up an alcoholic or a frustrated intellectual like my mother*”. Being

a campaigner against nuclear arms, as well as, active opponent of apartheid, Lessing was banned from South Africa and Rhodesia in 1956 for so many years. In the same year, she bade good-bye to the British Communist Party, as a consequence of Soviet Invasion of Hungary. These human principles of Lessing were unchanging and a temporal and she lived long enough to see the end of the un-human segregation policy in South Africa in mid-nineties. In the same vein, we see Lessing highly vocal in her opposition to Soviet action in Afghanistan. She rose against oppression, wherever and whenever the occasion demanded The Christian Science Monitor on 14th January 1988 carried the head-line, “Doris Lessing blows the veil of romanticism off Afghanistan”.

A 2010 BBC radio documentary listed Doris Lessing and several other prominent British writers as Joseph Stalin’s “useful idiots’. During the late 1990s, she suffered a minor stroke, which prevented her from active work. However, she was able to attend the theatre and opera. The thoughts of death occupied her mind in her last days and she often asked herself if she would have time to finish a new book. She breathed her last on 17 November 2013, aged 94 and is survived by her daughter Jean only, who lives in South Africa. All this shows Lessing’s life-long attachment with this country and even death could not sever these ties. Her life encompassed about a century and throughout her life she fearlessly put forth her well-weighed and well-thought upon ideas which were never impulsive and partial. She had been under surveillance for around twenty years in her mother-country (U.K) and this fact came to light on 21 August 2015, when a five-volume secret file built up by British Secret Service was made public and placed in The National Archives. The main charge against Lessing had been her association with communism and her anti-racist activism. It is a paradox that, in contradiction to these charges, Lessing was appointed as a Companion of Honour at the fag end of 1999 for “Conspicuous National Service”. She was also made a Companion of Literature by the Royal Society of Literature. Prior to that she had declined an OBE in 1977, while she declined a ‘Damehood’ (DBE in 1992. Lessing received the Noble Prize in Literature in 2007 at the age of about 88 years. It is wonderful that Lessing was out shopping for groceries when the Noble Prize

announcement came but it is more wonderful that she titled her Nobel Lecture or Not Winning the Nobel Prize and used it to draw attention to global inequality of opportunity.

Lessing's fiction is commonly divided into three phases.

Communist phase (1944-56):- During this phase Lessing wrote radically about social issues. She is said to have returned to this issue again in *The Good Terrorist* [1985]. In this phase are included her novel *The Grass is Singing* as well as the collection of short stories *African Stories* and all these are set in Southern Rhodesia where she lived then. The second phase is called Psychological phase (from 1956 to 1969). It includes the golden *Notebook* and the 'Children of Violence' quartet. Third comes the 'Sufi Phase', explored in the *Canopus in Argos* sequence of science fiction novels and novellas. She believed that in science fiction there is some of the best social fiction of our time. She attended the 1987 World Science Fiction Convention. She made a speech where she described her dystopian novel *Memoirs of a Survivor* as an attempt at an autobiography. Having become disillusioned with chaos-filled European conditions, more so after coming to realization that Marxism was totally devoid of spirituality, Lessing turned to Sufism the concepts of Sufism not only gave her inner satisfaction but also gave her a unique vision for the salvation and betterment of humanity as a whole. The *Canopus in Argos* novels use Sufi concepts which take the humanity to a higher plane of thinking, where there is no cut-throat competition between man and man and which seeks passively good for all and ill for none. These concepts want a man to seek self-realization at the personal level so that to become worthy to serve the humanity at large. While reading Lessing, we have to keep this in mind that she was an outsider in every country she lived in. In England she was of African birth and therefore "other". Thanks to her highly artistic genius that she used this conception to describe her protagonist Susan in her "To Room Nineteen". Susan is other in two ways (1) she is a woman and (2) she is losing her mind and therefore, 'other' to her own self. All this about Lessing and her career is clear like a sunny bright day. Even though, Lessing was self-educated she was vastly read in world literature. Keeping in view her literary output, it seems every way sensible for her to have left her schooling earlier. She had more than compensated her formal education by her extensive

reading. The fact that she was a voracious reader is confirmed by her own statement that “The highest point of literature was the novel of the nineteenth century, the work of Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Turgenev, Chekhov; the work of highest realists”.

The foregoing account of the background of Lessing’s novels and her close association with different ethnic and racial cultures as well as her association with great writers of the past widened her vision and perspective. It is no wonder that the range of novels is very wide and she leaves no field of life untouched. Even she goes beyond this world to explore the outer space. She, by her own account had been a rather introverted imaginative and neurotic child and these traits look to be helpful in her career. Later in life, her imaginative power helped her to see and show things in their proper perspective. Her introverted bent of mind helped her to be free from patriarchy, free from her two husbands and free from any other authoritarian hand. She did what she willed and there was no stopping of it. She had her own way of doing things and thus hot-headedness remained with her till her virtual end. It is an accepted fact that Lessing was an omnivorous reader even though a little formal knowledge at her back. Her exposure to knowledge consisted of her extensive reading of books on literature, philosophy, psychology, History, Sociology politics and Sufism. Even she tried her hand on General Science. Not to speak of such modern novelists as, Woolf, Joyce and Conrad she was well acquainted with the thoughts and philosophies of Balzac Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and many others, as she herself commented in later life, “I read these classics; it was my education” (1) [From the Book] Even if Lessing would not talk about her informal education, the great product of her literary works was enough to prove it. She died some two years before and the world is till to find a writer with such a literary wealth. Lessing was a keen observer of man and its environment and she made a good addition to her informal education by her keen observation of racial, political and social situations prevailing over Africa and Western Europe. As a result she has emerged as the most powerful novelist of English literature in modern world. She wrote what she saw. She got her ideas from the world surrounding her. She never claimed anything divine about her nor about her works. She never thought of fairy-tail ideas. She became what the world had made her.

She never care for anybody, she never sought for any favours. She was a humanist herself and she loved and liked the novelists of the nineteenth century for their humanism in the essay ‘The Small Personal Voice’ Lessing comments.

“For me the highest point of literature was the novel of the nineteenth century, the work of Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Turgenev and Chekhov. The work of the great realists..... They did have in common..... a climate of ethical judgment..... they were humanists”

She perceived warmth, compassion, humanity and loves of people in the literature of these writers and made their novels a statement of faith in man himself. She saw the world characterized by chaos, violence, destruction, was and disintegration. Going through her large literary output, whether in the form of novels, short stories or dramas, one is sure to find that human welfare is always at the back of her heart. Wherever and in whatever form she perceives human misery, she boldly raises against it and passionately appeals our conscience against it. A deep perusal of her literary output convinces us that it *“is characterized by a totality of vision rooted in a complex set of interrelated thanes”*. Lessing being a phobic writer has written more than fifty books including novels short stories, plays, poems etc and when we try to envisage the background of her works, we clearly see that African continent with its dry and arid landscape and coloured people is too prominent there. Lessing lived through her childhood and adolescence in Africa. She got twice married and twice divorced there. After proving a rebel child to her family, more especially to her mother, she worked as a nurse-maid and telephone-operator in Southern Rhodesia. She got much experience of the world and its happenings there. It was there that she got a liking for communism, thinking it to be the solution of the problematic of Colonialism and Racialism. Soon she got disenchanted with communism and left for Europe in 1949. Africa and its problems were so deep in her heart that she never missed it till her virtual hand. Her very first published novel *The Grass is singing* is set in a farming district of Southern Rhodesia in the 1940’s and she in she explores the race relations in Southern Africa between the colonizers and the colonized. The book gives in a true and dramatic presentation of apartheid.

Lessing's internationally acclaimed novel is *The Golden Notebook*. There are different settings in the novel. Still we find great African touches in it, as the black notebook sections of the novel are set in Africa. The chief protagonist Anna's troubles and tribulations are portrayed in this section. Then comes *The Children of Violence Series*, a quintet of novels. Here Lessing has proved to be more radical. The series runs about eighteen hundred pages and traces the life of the protagonist, Martha Quest, from her childhood in Southern Africa to adolescence, youth and marriage; all these stages coming between the First World War and the Second World War. There are autobiographical parallels between the protagonist and the author as both of them grew up in Rhodesia; each of them married twice there, joined communist movement there and left it soon. Even both of them immigrated to England in 1949. The series deals with the quest of a woman for self-identification in the male dominated society. The protagonist well-deserves the sub-name or family name Quest, as all her life shows her search for individuality. The novel not only traces Martha's childhood in Africa but also her adulthood in an imagined post-nuclear Britain. The fifth volume of the series *The Four-Gated City* was set in post-war Britain. The volume was published in 1969 and it gives us a synthesis of humanism, feminism, convention and experimentation. Anyway, the series ends with an apocalyptic vision of the future. So many people claimed that the novel promoted communism we find African touch almost in every novel and every story she wrote. Even some of her cat stories, written in lighter vein refer to African landscape. Her story collections like "Nine African Stories" (published 1968), "This was the old chief's country". *Collected African stories, volume I* (published 1973) and "The Sun Between Their Feet" *collected African Stories* ;(published 1973) all deal with, one way or the other, with Africa. Even her 'African Laughter', a memoir, has enough of African touch in it. To crown this all, Lessing on her 'Nobel Lecture' titled 'on not winning the Nobel Prize' talks not of her noble prize but of the forest devastation and bad condition of basic schools of north-west Zimbabwe in Africa. African experience has played a great part in her life and in the unique creativity of her fiction and most probably it has given her the conception of self. It is there that she observed people with different skin colours placed together which enabled them to observe and identify

the differences, eventually leading them to the consciousness of their own individual existence. Not in fiction only but also in her autobiography 'Under My Skin' deals with Lessing's upbringing in Persia and Southern Rhodesia along with her relationship with her own parents. The book touches upon her involvement with communism and her failed marriages. Mingled with her racial concern, which she had evolved and developed in Africa, is yet Lessing's another great concern---- treatment of women in modern world. Even if she strongly rejected the charge that she was a feminist, women dominated her novels since she published her first novel *The Grass is Singing* till her virtual death. It goes to her credit that she was a well-experienced writer of female psyche and thus, coned candidly write about the inner lives of women. She realized fully that the women-folk greatly suffered from emotional crisis in male dominated world. She laid great emphasis on women achieving psyche and emotional wholeness. She coolly considered the well-being of women but it goes to her credit that she rejected the motion that they should abandon the marriage and children. Mary Turner, the protagonist of the novel, "Grass is Singing" is the chief character of the novel and the whole drama revolves round her. Then comes Lessing's psychologically most complex novel 'The Golden Notebook' and here the supreme character we met is in the shape of Anna Wolf; she is the supreme example of a divided woman fragmented between her emotional needs and her intellectual caliber. Doris Lessing's *Children of Violence* is a sequence of five novels and the series runs on well over 1800 pages. Here we are given the story of the various stages of life of one Maratha Quest, a fictional parallel of Doris Lessing herself. The series is full of the details of Maratha Quest's constant and painful search of her social status, herself identity, freedom and, finally inner awareness. As an adolescent girl, Maratha is in a state of tug-of-war with her family, as well as the society around her. The old patterns of life, whether in family or in society, do not seem befitting her and her inability to find a self-image causes her to drift throughout her life. In the same way, Kate Brown, the protagonist of Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark*, behaves like other protagonists of Lessing; even though she is a middle-aged woman she feels that she is not needed in the family which makes her reassess her own self. Taking stock of her past, she feels that she had performed all her

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womanly duties but had neglected her own inner-self. She struggles hard out of this situation and succeeds in the end. Not in these major works only Doris Lessing has not left her woman characters uncared for in her minor works also. She takes the woman-problem as a human problem. Her writings give us a real picture adding nothing superfluous or provocations. Her judgment of the problem is objective and well-balanced. The feminist movement as advocated by many of the woman writers had claimed women superiority instead of gender equality and even some of them had claimed abhorrence of sex as a means of female emancipation.

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