

**SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE: MARTHA’S DEFINITION TO LIFE
IN DORIS LESSING’S *MARTHA QUEST***

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Abstract

Doris Lessing is an author who has narrated so many tales which has shed light on the mental persona on the various stages of a human’s life. She has brought in so many strong personalities in the form of protagonists willing to go against the tide. *Martha Quest* is the story of one such girl who questions her self-identity, her stand on controversial issues, and how she defines her life’s goal through it all.

Doris Lessing is a Nobel laureate whose impressive oeuvre has inspired readers for decades. She was born in Persia, raised in South Africa and the continent has dwelled in her writings physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. When Lessing is asked if she found it strange that she was still associated with Africa, she points out: “No, because it seems to me I belong to both places really. I certainly think I am returning to southern Africa when I write” (Lessing & Daymond, 2006, p.239). Her writings display a rich collection and cover a very wide range of topics and themes. As Roberta Rubenstein (1979) summarizes in her concluding remarks about Lessing's work: “Her efforts to break through not only the intellectual blinders to perception and knowledge, and conventional assumptions concerning the nature of reality itself, but also the limitations of verbal expression, should assure her stature as one of the major, unique and visionary writers of our time” (256). It would be a tedious task to challenge Doris Lessing’s works into a closure and compartmentalize it into a specific category. And the author has been very defensive in being categorized into a feminist writer when her famous work *The Golden Notebook* The central theme of the novel being “breakdown” which comes as a result of facing all the compartmentalizations and divisions within oneself: “But nobody so much as noticed this

central theme, because the book was instantly belittled, by friendly reviewers as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war” (Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, 1971, p.8). Thus, it’s best to relish the delights of her writings without trying to designate her a tag and go with its beautiful flow.

In the selected novel, *Martha Quest* Doris Lessing has given her soul to this work and given such a deep insight into what it is to be a teenager, how it is to think like one, how to challenge oneself with the given scenario, and how one develops oneself. Every chapter in this novel is like a flower blossoming to its full potential to let the world enjoy its beauty and unravel its mystery. Teenage years are tumultuous and as observed by Mark Oestreicher in his book, “*Understanding Your Young Teen: Practical Wisdom for Parents*” that the gap between the perception many adults have of middle schoolers’ potential and their actual potential is fairly wide. Most of this gap is rooted in complex cultural misunderstandings – even fear – of young teens. (pg. 15, 2011, New York)

As mentioned by Duncan Lindsay in his article “Being a teenager is the worst time of your life and here’s why” in *Metro* an online newspaper. He states that “‘You young ones don’t know you’re born,’ said every old person ever, underestimating the pressures and hell of a modern teenage life.” In *Martha Quest*, Doris Lessing dwells on all these key aspects which we will discuss further below.

Martha Quest was published in the year 1952 and it has a cathartic effect as every person would like to unravel his or her past and have a clearer view of things. When we meet Martha she has a critical overview of things, people, and situations. As she observes her mother and her neighbour Mrs. Vans Rensberg gossip about petty issues ranging from their husbands, their maids, the black Negroes and their children. Martha fumed at the uselessness of the two women who wasted their lives on these silly matters. The two women prided on their farms but as Martha looked over the fields all she saw was the unkempt farms and the mud houses in which they lived. The royalty that they displayed because they were Whites living in a British colony who came to civilize the kaffirs or the blacks as they were referred. To Martha, this made her feel uncomfortable and incompetent.

Perhaps, if she could have expressed what she felt, she would have said that the calm factual air of the writing was too distant from the uncomfortable emotions that filled her; perhaps she was so resentful of her surroundings and her parents that the resentment overflowed into everything near her. (*Martha Quest* 7)

With that framework of a critically thinking girl named Martha Quest let us look into the some of the common challenges that she had faced as a teenager and how she dealt with them. In the best-selling book *Cultural studies: Theory and practice* (2008), Chris Barker points out that identity has become an important issue in the field of cultural studies in the 1990s (216). We can talk about two types of identities: self-identity and social identity. The first one comprises the way that we think of ourselves, whereas the second one is the identity of the group to which we feel a sense of belonging (216). Martha was in this struggle that every human being undergoes in their teen years. With that pressure of being socially responsible but with the burning desires of what one truly wants to be.

Huge Expectations

Like every other parent, Mr. and Mrs. Quest was worried about their child and her future. Her mother specifically wanted her to go to a proper school but Martha protested and self-taught

herself by reading all kinds of Literature. She felt that a syllabus and a curriculum could not hold her back to the variety of books she would like to explore and learn. We find her in the opening pages of the novel reading Havelock Ellis on sex and admiring Epstein's work. To her mother they were a ridiculous set of people and their works should be banned. She did not take up the public test as a rebellious act to prove that she could get a job by herself. As a normal teenager who would have been told that if you failed your exams your life will be doomed by a teacher and a parent. It is considered normal to be afraid of failing it and live in constant fear. She went against the norms and rather enjoyed her time with books. Thus, gaining immense knowledge compared to her peers.

Hormones and Puberty

This is a really stressful period when the body is developing and the hormones are raging. The fluctuation of emotions can be so overwhelming that suddenly one cries, is angry or irritated. To top to that one has to perform academically, be socially acceptable and show prospects of being a good human. When Mrs. Van commented, "A girl must make her men respect her" seeing Martha read unconventional books and dress like a boy. In addition, Mrs. Quest quipped that "A man will never marry a girl he does not respect." Martha stood up to them and explained that though her hormones baffled her at times. With her books given to her by the Cohen Boys, her reading has made her understand her current situation.

She was adolescent, and therefore bound to be unhappy; British, and therefore uneasy and defensive; in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and therefore inescapably beset with problems of race and class; female, and obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past. (Martha Quest 12)

Societal Pressure

Martha was teased by her friend Marnie that she had a thing with the Solly Cohen. At the phrases like, 'get herself a man' and 'she's doing very well for herself' she knew she was being ridiculed and compared. According to the prescribed societal laws, she should behave and think like Marnie.

Marnie sighed and glanced down at her pretty fingernails for comfort. She would have so much liked an intimate talk with a girl of her own age. She would have liked to say, with a giggle that she was sixteen herself and could get a man, with luck, next year, like her sister Stephanie. (Martha Quest 17)

Martha had her rifle across her thighs, her nails stained with tobacco, ink and engine oil. Her hair was neither shiny nor glossy. She did not dream of marrying a man who had a bigger farm than her father so that she could live comfortably like Marnie. When asked by Marnie whether she would like to marry young. She vehemently replies back saying, "Marry young? Me? I'd die first. Tie me down to babies and housekeeping (p.17). As she took her rifle and walked into the jungle she told herself that she would not alter her dreams nor her disposition. She would keep trying and self-define her life. Even though she has felt herself to be different from other young girls of her age like Marnie while she was on the farm, here her life in the words of Knapp is an integration in the "mindless social life and the dubious thrills of dating" (quoted in Vainiomaa 35).

Bullying

Even though she was known to be a headstrong girl there were situations when she felt the pinch of being bullied as a teenager. Her first encounter was with Mr. McFarline the wicked old Scotsman who had numerous children from his many wives. As she could not walk into town she had taken his help to ride in his car. He had inappropriately tried to touch her. But she pushed off his hand and made him realize his behavior. That day she realized no matter how young or old women were considered to be a piece of meat and remembered the lines that she had read on women's liberation. Her second was when Billy Vansberg invited her for a dance and forcibly kiss her. She understood that night that this was not going to be the last but fight back as she had with them.

Parents

She often thought that her parents had been teenagers but why was it so difficult for them to understand her. She wanted to make her father see beyond the farm and the old mud house. She wanted him to move on from his past life a soldier and also from the horrors of it. She wanted him to get them a new car and try the innovative new ideas in farming. Her father was a failure to her and he was like a zombie roaming around their house. He had the look of a person have claimed by sleep and still in the war trenches. He was in the long middle period of life when people do not change, but his changelessness was imposed not by a resisting vigor but a spell of tiredness. As Sneha notes in her essay, "This day dreaming attitude of her parents is irritable to Martha who can clearly see what her parents refuse to acknowledge, that they have failed and that they are going nowhere. However, this creates a crisis in Martha regarding "home" because however hard she tries she cannot help but share her parents 'unconscious attitude.'" As for her mother, there was this ongoing conflict which ranged from her attitude to life to her defending the Jews and the Kaffirs. When the mother said that she should be careful or she would be raped by Negroes. Martha scoffs at it by saying that if that happened she would be deemed a national hero. She wasn't going to be a white racist and be influenced by her impractical mother's fears. Rather she played with them and had developed good friendships with the Negroes. Though it might be seen as an act of defiance. Martha was someone who always looked deep into the matter of things and has her own version.

Identity

In her aspect of her life, there were predefined definitions given out to her. When Martha tried to modify her dress by opening the stitches and cutting it off. Martha and her father had a squabble over it. She had to wrestle her mother to make her realize she was not a kid anymore. She had to fight back to get her freedom and be accepted as a young adult. As Brändström says, "Martha's parents forced her to escape them not only by making her feel unable to express her intellect and imagination freely, which she has in common with her male counterpart; they also suffocate her by making her feel that she was born in the 'wrong' gender" (31).

She said defiantly, 'Daddy, why should I wear dresses like a kid of ten?

He said resentfully, 'Well you are a kid. Must you quarrel all the time with your mother?'

Mother, I am not wearing these dresses anymore.

She glanced at her husband, then came quickly across the room, and laid her hands on either side of the girl's waist, as if trying to press her back into girlhood. (Martha Quest 80)

When she finally finished stitching the white dress to wear to her first party. To Martha, it was her first step to explore her individuality. She stepped outside of her room to the disgust of her parents at the enormity of adulthood featured in the dress. As for her, this was her moment of triumph and truth. She had desired that she would be sent off to her first dance with love and approval. It was denied to her and she felt the pain numb her. The state of war regarding Martha's sexual identity resulted neither to her mother or Martha winning rather it ruined the mother-daughter relationship. Mrs. Quest does not like Martha to wear clothes like that of a grown up girl because "it makes the boys around Martha seem less dangerous. If Mrs. Quest admitted Martha actually is a young woman, she would accept Martha as a sexual being and that is against Mrs. Quest's Victorian sense of morals" (Vainiomaa 31).

With a last look at her parents, which was mingled with scorn and appeal, she went to the door, carefully holding her skirts. She wanted to weep, an impulse she indignantly denied to herself. For at that moment when she had stood before them, it was a role which went far beyond her. It should have been a moment of abnegation when she must be kissed, approved, and set free. (Lessing, 90)

Even though she felt she was different from other young girls of her age like Marnie while she was on the farm, here her life in the words of Knapp is an integration in the "mindless social life and the dubious thrills of dating" quoted in Vainiomaa 35). We still see the struggle she undergoes as she tries to be like the other girls but still questions her individuality. She realizes that in her home she could never really discover what she truly wants to be in life. The very thought of moving away made her feel like, "She was a new person, and an extraordinary, magnificent, an altogether new life was beginning" (Lessing 102) and that "a phase of her life had ended" (101). Martha was consciously bidding farewell to her childhood. She bid farewell to the 'anthill', 'the bubbling spring', 'the big tree' and the compound where she used to play with the native children against her mother's orders. The decision might not have been wholly on her ongoing conflict with her mother and the absent father. But it showcases her inner strength and her refusal to be an ordinary teenager who is governed by ordinariness and quietly follow the norms. She goes to different places and undergoes different experiences that change their outlook towards their old ideas, beliefs and life itself. While Martha's journey to a final understanding takes four more books. It is a symbol of her quest for wholeness becomes apparent in the yearning and goal for harmony between nature and the city, between instinct and reason, between intuition and self-consciousness (Labovitz, 152)

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