

SUCH A LONG JOURNEY: JOURNEY OF LESSING'S HEROINES IN *MARTHA QUEST AND THE SUMMER BEFORE THE DARK*

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ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing's novels are often a tale of the protagonists who are dissatisfied with their present situation and, willingly or unwillingly, set along the road to discovery of their identity. *Martha Quest* and *The Summer Before the Dark* present before their readers two similar tales where Martha and Kate, one a young girl and the other a mother and wife of long years set out on their paths to discover who they are.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, bildungsroman, female identity, feminism.

A journey undertaken by the protagonist in search of her identity is a repeated motif in Lessing's canon. This journey, which can be physical, psychological and (at times) spiritual, opens up new vistas of life and provides an opportunity to her protagonists to learn more about themselves. This paper compares the journeys of two of Lessing's protagonists – Martha, the young teenage girl who leaves her home in the African farm to carve a new life for herself and Kate, a mother of four children who starts a new phase of her life when she sets on a journey that takes her to places across the world.

Martha is the protagonist of an entire series of novels, *The Children of Violence*. The series which comprises of five novels, namely *Martha Quest*, *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, *Landlocked* and *The Four Gated City* was written by Lessing in a time period spanning from 1952 to 1969. The series traces the social, spiritual and psychological growth of Martha from her early years in the colony till the time of her death. As such, the series can be read as a *Bildungsroman*. This genre includes the *Entwicklungsroman* or the novel of general growth, the *Erziehungsroman* or the novel of educational development and the *Kuntelsroman* or the novel of artistic realisation (Brändström 4). The present paper deals with the first novel of the series *Martha Quest* and reads it as Martha's beginning of a long journey in the quest of her identity and as a bildungsroman, comparing it with *The Summer Before the Dark* (published in 1973) which follows the spiritual, psychological and physical wanderings of Kate Brown, who leaves her home somewhat grudgingly, only to realize as the novel progresses that this journey

has opened new doors of understanding the world around her as well as has helped her in taking the first few steps towards realising her true self. Kate's story has often been compared to a quest story, where the protagonist leaves home in search of enlightenment in one form or the other and returns successfully after slaying dragons and facing other difficulties enroute. It can also be seen as a story of Kate's development, even though it does not strictly belong to the genre of bildungsroman.

Lessing in the note at the end of the final volume of the series, *The Four Gated City* proclaimed: "This book is what the Germans call a *Bildungsroman*. We don't have a word for it" (Lessing 346). However, more often than not, the entire series has been read as a bildungsroman tracing the journey of its protagonist Martha. It is also important to note that the series has autobiographical shades. As Ahmed and Jahan note in their essay, "Martha's intellectual development and self-exile from her homeland parallels in many ways the circumstances in which Lessing herself has been a part" (Ahmed and Jahan 2). However, even if one chooses to ignore the autobiographical aspects of this series, it is interesting to see the gradual development and changes that occur in Martha's political, social and psychological understanding with the passage of time.

When the readers first meet Martha, she is a young teenager dissatisfied with all that she sees around her. She lives in a farm with her parents and belongs to the dominant white race in Rhodesia. Her quest for identity starts from the difficult relationship she shares with her family, particularly her mother. Martha's parents are British settlers in Rhodesia who have not been able to do as good as they had expected to in their farm. They live in Rhodesia with the hopes of returning to England every year, which is their "home". 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. Martha's quarrel with her parents and specially her mother also stems from her mother's preference for the male child. As Brändström says, "Martha's parents force 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). Apart from this, there is a lack of understanding between Martha and her mother which leads to a perpetual battle like state between them. Her hostility against her mother provokes Martha into doing things like befriending the Cohen boys and reading books that her mother is sure to disapprove of, and these friends and books are what act as catalysts in the development of the anti-racial stance of Martha, which is in sharp contrast with the views of her mother. There is also a state of war regarding Martha's sexual identity. 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). Her father is on better terms with Martha than her mother, but his occasional presence in her life is not enough to give Martha a sense of balance and replenishment after a tedious and stormy relationship with her mother. According to Labovitz, this tumultuous relationship between Martha and her mother is an important factor in the journey of identity that Martha takes: "An important aspect of Martha's quest to liberate herself from the inhibiting hold of [the] unsatisfactory mother-daughter relationship in order to become a totally realized human being" (quoted in Brändström 32).

Such pressures from home front force Martha to go out and search for her identity, which she does in this novel by deciding to leave the veld and go in the nearby town to find a job and live on her own. When she moves to town, she has a feeling of exhilaration and Lessing expresses Martha's feelings on leaving her old life by saying that, "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). Though this life does end her phase of living in the veld, her mother's interference in her life does not stop even though she gets a great degree of freedom to pursue her own wishes in the city. Martha's life in the city is wrapped up in her job at the Cohen's firm and going to parties with her friends after office hours. Martha's coming to the town is an important step not only in her journey of personal growth because she gets out of the tiresome struggle with her mother, but also because it gives her an opportunity to take decisions for herself, even though it seems that most of the time her decisions are swayed by social conventions. This is also an important stage in her journey, the stage when she gets sexual freedom, though she is caught into gendered roles even while exercising this freedom. When Martha comes out to town, she is initially engulfed in a life style not uncommon to any other young girl in the town. Her time after work is occupied in going out to various parties and dances that go on for the most part of the night with Donovan. Even though she has felt herself to be different from other young girls of her age like Marnie while she was in 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). Though soon Martha starts perceiving the futility of the kind of life she is leading in the town, she finds it difficult to sever herself from it. Martha's life in town is governed by the gendered demands made on her by the society and she is not as free to act as she thought she would be. In her relationship with Donovan, she is merely the doll, which is controlled by Donovan in even minor matters like the kind of dress or hair she should wear. The sports club which Martha joins is another place where women are treated as having a secondary function to men and Martha takes up the same role in the club as any other girl. However, soon Martha begins to feel oppressed by the club's demands and by her mother's repeated interference in her life which comes in the form of a visit to Donovan's mother. As an act of defiance against these forces and as an assertion of her personality and the newly gained sexual freedom, she has a brief affair with Adolf King, a Jew who is treated as an outsider by the club crowd. This estranges her from her group's crowd a great deal and further estrangement comes in when she does not condone of the behaviour of the club members towards the native servants and ends up being labelled "kaffir lover" by the piqued Donovan.

But Martha's is only in the beginning of her road to self realization in this novel and she keeps making mistakes even when she thinks she is doing something different and rebelling. She thinks she is making her own decisions when in reality they are governed by social patterns. Her relationship with Adolf King is one such incidence where she regrets what she has done because she feels trapped in the relationship. Ultimately, it is her "friends" who come to rescue her from this embarrassing relationship. Martha's take on marriage is another example of her inability to decide for herself. In the book Martha claims never to marry young, telling Marnie, ". . . Marry young? Me? I would die first" (Lessing 18). However, that is what she ultimately does by marrying Douglas after they have been in a relationship for a relatively short time. Though Martha is not sure if she wants to get married till the end, and has ambivalent feelings towards marriage, she does walk down the aisle with Douglas conforming to yet another pattern of society that she had so derided. Indeed, she labours under the misconception that marriage will

open a new wonderful world for her, which will be an escape from the ennui of her everyday life. This misconception is soon shattered after she gets married. Though *Martha Quest* depicts only the first step of Martha's journey which continues till her death in *The Four Gated City*, it can be argued that the novel keeps a strong foundation for the development of the protagonist and does function as a bildungsroman.

The Summer Before the Dark traces another journey in the quest of self knowledge and identity. The journey here is that of Kate Brown, and in contrast to the young Martha, Kate is in her forties and married with four grown up children. Right at the novel's beginning one can see that Kate is in a state that is ripe for starting a quest of identity. Kate's state of mind at the novel's opening is such that "she finds herself feeling increasingly uncertain not only of that all-encompassing matter, who she is, but of what she thinks, whether the phrases that move through her mind are really her own thoughts or merely ready-made substitutes" (Stout 7). Most of her life till the point has been spent in living life according to set notions of motherhood and marriage. She has willingly sacrificed her identity, her likes and dislikes for accommodating her family members. But the realization that she could have been much more than what she is starts seeping when all her children grow up and she starts feeling unwanted in her home. Another reason of her dissatisfaction with her present is her husband Michel's casual affairs with various women that disgust Kate because they are not emotional involvements, rather exchange of sexual favours. As a result of all these factors, Kate at the novel's beginning is dissatisfied and the time to start her journey in search of her identity is right.

The journey begins when she gets an offer to work as a translator for a project at Global Food and does so well that is hired for longer duration of time. At the same time, her children and her husband go out of Britain for various reasons and this further leaves her free to set on her own quest. However, it is important to note that she does not start willingly on this quest; rather there are moments all throughout when she battles the impulse to quit the road to self discovery and go back to her routine life style. After she joins Global Food she gets an opportunity to visit Istanbul where an international conference is being hosted by Global Food and here she meets Jeffrey, who becomes her younger "lover" and together they go to Spain. The relationship between Kate and Jeffrey is important because it helps Kate gain further insight regarding her relationship with her family and realise what distance she has travelled since she was a talented young girl at the university. Though Jeffrey is Kate's lover, she cannot help feeling maternally towards him again and again.

. . . On the edge of a mile of soiled and scuffed sand that glittered with banal moonlight, watching a hundred or so young people . . . besides a young man who – it was no use pretending otherwise – made her feel maternal. . . . She was actually thinking like a mother (Lessing 92).

Kate's trip with Jeffrey is short lived because he falls sick from the beginning of the trip. Though Kate feels right from the beginning that in such state of health they should not travel any further, Jeffrey insists that they do and they travel to inner regions of Spain, where his sickness grows alarmingly and he is kept in isolation at a convent since there are no hospitals nearby. Kate stays alone in the small hotel they have taken together and this stay by herself in the hotel gives her ample time to think of the direction her life has taken. She realises how much time she has spent worrying for others and has hardly paid herself attention. In an attempt to bring out a new and independent Kate, she decides to leave the trip and return to London after she is convinced of the fact that her stay can do nothing to improve Jeffrey's condition. She then

returns to London, where she falls in a kind of psycho-somatic illness and the doctors cannot find anything physically wrong with her. She stays in the hotel room in London facing the “cold wind” from the future that she has been putting off for a long time now. These chances of staying alone, without any pressure on her, give her the chance to reach the decision that “the future would continue from where she had left off as a child. . . . All those years were now seeming a betrayal of what she really was” (Lessing 140). This decision, however, is fraught with difficulties as time and again Kate has the impulse to revert to what has been the mode of her life for so long now. But she fights these strong impulses and her decision to continue on a new road is specially helped by a visit she pays to her home in a fit of longing for her old life. She is shocked to learn that just because she has lost a lot of weight due to sickness and no longer looks the smartly dressed woman she otherwise is, her next door neighbour Mary Finchley is unable to recognise her. This realization that her identity is so linked to the outer accessories such as clothes, and that Mary cannot identify her just because she looks different sets her off on the path of self discovery, of realising who she really is.

She then rents a room in a flat which she shares with a young girl Maureen. Her stay at the flat is the final stage of her journey before she goes back home and she learns a lot in this stage. Coming to the flat in a shrunken and lusterless state, she is able to detach herself from the needs and wants of her family and look at herself as an independent individual after a long time. She learns to detach herself from the unnecessary needs created by her family when she learns to keep herself aloof from the affairs of Maureen, who is the same age as her youngest children and on a verge of making a critical decision about the course of her life and marriage. She learns to create a space for herself where she lives a life of her choosing and is not at the beck and call of her grown up children who, she feels, remember her only when needed. An important marker of her spiritual development is the recurring dream of the dying seal which Kate has to save. In the end of the novel, when Kate becomes strong enough to assert her own personality wherever needed and stops being a slave to the whims and fancies of her family, she is also able to complete the dream of the seal by saving it. All these developments take place while she is at Maureen’s flat and when she finally leaves that flat to go home, the reader is left with a strong sense of this being a different Kate than the one the reader was introduced to in the beginning.

It can be concluded that both the novels *Martha Quest* and *The Summer Before the Dark* are novels of a long journey. While *Martha Quest*, though a complete work in itself, represents only a phase of the long journey of Martha, *The Summer Before the Dark* presents its readers with Kate’s journey, which ends with a new decision on her part. In both the novels the protagonists, dissatisfied with their initial situation, start on a journey. In both the cases they go to different places and undergo 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, Kate’s journey in search of herself ends as her new journey begins when she leaves for her home at the end.

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