

## QUEST FOR IDENTITY OF MARY TURNER AND MARTHA QUEST: PORTRAITS OF DORIS LESSING

**Rajesh N. Sonkusare**

Assistant Professor, English  
Shrimati Ambabai K. Khobragade  
College, Gangalwadi Th: Brahmapuri  
Dt: Chandrapur (M.S)

### Abstract

I have investigated the similarities and differences between the main female characters of Lessing's novels-- Mary Turner and Martha Quest through the method of feminist reading, thematic based on critical approaches regarding feminism, gender, and psychology. The psyche of the female protagonists is rather difficult to explore as it involves a wide range of related issues. Without any doubt, one of the most fundamental issues in Lessing's writing concerns her attempt to portray relations between the individual and collective. Female identity is, in fact, made up of two elements--the individual and the collective. The collective is often an oppressive force and interferes with the individual. Regardless of this fact, the inner and outer selves are inseparable parts of women's lives. The inner world of the characters is related to the individual, whereas the outer world is associated with the collective and it is obvious that one cannot escape either of these two aspects.

**Keywords:** oppression, emancipation, personal, feminism, identity, self, gender

### Introduction:

Doris Lessing's heroines cannot express their inner-self on account of the fact that they are tied to the family and by the bonds of marriage. The family unit and marriage, as an institution, are repressive forces for both women as they do not provide them with enough freedom and space for self-realisation.

It is also worth pointing out that both women heroines represent traditional female roles but at the same time rebel against social norms and stereotypes. They are forced to adjust to these norms and they are expected to fulfil social expectations.

Besides, they need to conform to the traditional hierarchical social system implying that they should accept submissive roles in their attitude towards men. It is mainly due to the fact that the primary area of their responsibility in society remains to be the family and child rearing. Consequently, the role of a mother and wife ought to be their fundamental interest. As a result of this, both Mary and Martha are in fact forced to get married against their will in order to fulfil social expectations concerning gender stereotypes.

### **Discussion:**

It is apparent that both Mary and Martha are confined to the role of a wife and mother. Undoubtedly, the patriarchal society is represented mainly within the institution of marriage and family. Martha rebels against the norms of society and refuses to accept her biological and social role associated with motherhood. Similarly, Mary makes attempts to leave her husband, as her marriage does not fulfil her expectations. In fact, both women are constrained to marry as a result of the oppressive society, in which every woman is supposed to adjust to her predefined role. By proposing this view Lessing implies that it is rather difficult for an independent woman to assert herself.

Unfortunately, their married life is, far from what they had previously dreamed it to be. Their marriage is, without any doubt, considered “proper” by society. It is difficult to draw precise conclusions about the female sense of the self in Lessing’s novels as it is a rather complicated issue which involves a wide range of factors. Nevertheless, on the basis of a detailed analysis of Lessing’s female characters and their psychological development that a wide range of similarities can be traced through Lessing’s novels. In addition to that, some elements of contrast should not be left out in the discussion, either. There appear to be only slight differences regarding the fact that Mary is less active in her emancipation endeavours than Martha.

Apart from that, Mary’s life has--in contrast to Martha’s life--a declining tendency, before it reaches a tragic ending brought about by a long-term psychological pressure imposed upon her.

As regards Martha, she feels repressed not only by her marriage but also by her child. At this point an extremely significant issue of motherhood comes up in the discourse. It is obvious that Martha cannot be identified with her motherhood and is forced to leave her daughter in order to set herself free. To deepen the understanding of all the novels under investigation, it is also necessary to take into account the fact that both heroines are not on good terms with their parents, which presumably contributes to their problematic standpoint with regard to family life and marriage in their future lives. On the one hand, both female characters feel similar resentment to their parents, but on the other hand, they are aware of the fact that they also share similar traits with them and it is impossible to change this matter of fact. It is clearly demonstrated on the occasion when Martha contemplates about her parents’ influence on her personality:

*Martha, in violent opposition to her parents, was continually being informed that their influence on her was unalterable, and that it was much too late to change herself. (Martha Quest 15)*

Mary in fact, associates “love” with her mother and “hatred” with her father, whereas in the case of Martha it is the other way round.

The alienation of both female characters from their outside world is what causes conflicts and tensions in their inner lives as well. Mary becomes isolated from her husband and other people, whereas Martha’s alienation manifests itself primarily in her relationship with her mother--and later with her husband, too. Lessing stresses the importance to connect the individual and collective identity. On the one hand, both female characters lack a sense of belonging to something or someone, but on the other hand the collective identity, which is being imposed upon them, is also the source of their dissatisfaction and resentment. Nevertheless, both

Martha and Mary are not active enough in their quest for their personal identities, presumably on account of the fact that outside influences are more powerful than their inward efforts.

From the psychological point of view, it is rather difficult to explore the complexity of women protagonists' minds; however, Lessing's literary art presents to the reader a deep insight into women's psyche and emotional behaviour. In her writing Lessing provides three main levels of exploration. Firstly, the "individual" level--a self-analysis of the individual characters--secondly, the "interpersonal" level--a relationship between two individuals--and lastly, the level of "social relations" which focuses on the attitude of the protagonists towards social conventions.

As far as the quest for one's self is concerned, it is a result of the process made up of both natural and cultural demands upon women. Besides, the analysis reflects the subservient position of women in society, taking into consideration not only social but also political aspects of their lives. Throughout the novels we may trace a lot of similarities between the individual characters, i.e. Mary Turner and Martha Quest. The main conflict manifests itself in their difficult and vain search for the real self. As a result of social pressures both heroines are supposed to adjust to their female roles and stereotypes. In this respect, traditional institutions make them become a part of the collective but, on the other hand, this does not enable them to manifest their independent, creative, and true selves. The problematic self-realisation of women's personalities is presumably based on the assumption that their roles are predefined and not subjected to any changes. Their subordinated position in a patriarchal male dominated world is rather limited and results in their alienation and abnormal behaviour, which may eventually lead to a mental breakdown, as in the case of Mary Turner.

### **Conclusion:**

Doris Lessing's novels represent a complicated relationship between the individual female characters and the whole society with respect to their gender roles. This fact is of vital importance for the investigation and subsequent analysis of the characters that are searching for their self realisation, mainly outside marriage. Despite the fact that both women conform to women stereotypes, they keep searching for ways of escape from their female roles predisposed by the patriarchal society.

In conclusion, it is clear that the formation of the female identity is a complex issue, which requires a psychological introspection of the women protagonists as well as the exploration of their outer selves. To demonstrate this fact, Lessing provides a deep insight into the women's mind and portrays their relations both to the male counterparts and to the society as a whole. The comparative approach in the previous chapter has also shown that the nature of female identity is formed both by natural and cultural demands. Furthermore, the situation of dissatisfied middle-class women and their revolt against the patriarchal society is, without any doubt, the point of departure for their quest. As I have suggested earlier, the women protagonists feel that they cannot be recognized as individuals because of the fact that they are tied to their social demands and biological needs, but on the other hand, their longing for love makes them subservient to their male-counterparts. Women's fight against family oppression manifests itself particularly in their search for freedom and independence. It is also worth pointing out that not only the position of the suppressed women but also the position of the black people is taken into consideration in the analysed novels. I have discovered that a comparison of women and black people is of great significance mainly on account of the fact that it involves similar issues. In my view, Lessing emphasises that both colonised communities have to face humiliation and "violence" of the outside oppressive forces, as the title of the analysed series itself testifies. In

this respect Lessing's main intention is to reflect the oppressive forces that not only women but generally all human beings are forced to confront in the course of the 20th century.

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