

Socio-Cultural Study of Doris Lessing's Selected Novels:
With Special References to the Novels - *The Grass is Singing*,
The Golden Notebook, *Memoirs of a Survivor*, *The Fifth Child*,
Ben in the World and *The Sweetest Dream*

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Introduction-

The most prolific of contemporary British writers and the recipient of more than twenty literary prizes and awards, Doris May Tayler was born in Kermanshah, Persia (now Iran) and grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) until 1949, when she came to England with the youngest of her three children and with the manuscript of her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*. The novel was published in 1950, and gained its author immediate success. Since then she has never ceased writing, producing a huge number of novels, short stories, personal narratives, plays, and poems exploring on unprecedented variety of themes.

After a seven-year absence, Lessing returned to Southern Rhodesia in 1956, in order to revisit the country of her childhood. At the end of her trip – during which she had been under constant surveillance by the political police – her presence was declared undesirable in both Southern Rhodesia and South Africa because of her political views. The experiences of this trip are narrated in her book *Going Home* (1957), partly a personal narrative, partly a travel notebook. It was only after Rhodesia had gained its independence in 1980 that she was able to return to that part of Africa. *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992) describes her four visits to Southern Africa, between 1982 and 1992. Her autobiographical volume *Under My Skin* (1994) depicts her childhood in Zimbabwe and

Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography (1997) covers the years from 1959 to 1962.

The years spent in Africa influenced Lessing deeply, both as a maturing woman and as a writer. 'Africa belongs to the Africans', she wrote in 1956. 'The sooner they take it back, the better. But a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it' (Going Home, 11). Undoubtedly she is one of 'those' who feel at home in it, to the extent that ever since she left Africa, she has regarded herself as an exile.

She is, after all, 'an expert in unsettlement' (Sage, 11), or, in Judith Gardiner's words, 'a colonial in exile', whose work is characterized by 'a fruitful unsettledness that makes... [her both an] inheritor...and [an] antagonist...to imperialism.... The English literary tradition is the reassuring heritage of a mother tongue, but it is also somewhat alien' (Gardiner, 13).

Lessing is marked not only by the colonial's ambiguous relationship to the English tradition, but also by the landscape of Africa, which causes a peculiar view on mankind. Lessing says in her introduction to *African Stories*: "I believe that the chief gift from Africa to writers, white and black, is the continent itself, its presence which for some people is like an old fever, latent ways in their blood; or like an old wound throbbing in the bones as the air changes. That is not a place to visit unless one chooses to be an exile ever afterwards from an inexplicable majestic silence lying just over the border of memory or thought. Africa gives you the knowledge that man is a small creature, among other creatures, in a large landscape."

These words are indicative of a writer whose literary career spans beyond the borders of space, memory, time, gender or class. They also point at my main argument, namely that Lessing is an author who erases almost all the stubborn boundaries of our mental map. It is not an exaggeration to say that Doris Lessing's writing career was forged by Africa. Her main haunting theme, which increasingly comes to dominate Lessing's fiction, is definitely grounded in the problem of how, as a white settler, she can deal with the relations of oppression: the inner and outer dimensions of her condition of an exile, in Africa (where she is British) and in 'her' country, where she longs for her African experience. The tensions in Lessing's stories clearly rely on the coexistence of a romantic response to the African bush and the author's awareness that the capitalism of the settlers was to blame, as it sought to transform it into profitable settlements. The landscape, its people – both black and white – Africa's recent history and present society, which informed most of her first thirty years, are the subject matter of a major part of her writing.

In her African writings Doris Lessing works both within and beyond the colonial experience. She understands the rigorous limitations of colonial society, which relies for identity and cohesion on the attempt at maintaining its own narrow boundaries. In spite of that, she imaginatively steps outside those borders. This extended vision enables her to see beyond the false colonial myth of white superiority, of the necessity that blacks and whites should never mix.

Doris May Lessing (22 October 1919 – 17 November 2013) was a British novelist, poet, playwright, librettist, biographer and short story writer. Her novels include *The Grass is Singing* (1950), the sequence of five novels collectively called *Children of Violence* (1952–69), *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and five novels collectively known as *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979–1983).

Lessing was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature. In awarding the prize, the Swedish Academy described her as "that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny". Lessing was the eleventh woman and the oldest person ever to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature.

In 2001, Lessing's *The Sweetest Dream* published and she was awarded the David Cohen Prize for a lifetime's achievement in British literature in the same year. In 2008, *The Times* ranked her fifth on a list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945".

Doris Lessing's Life-

Lessing was born Doris May Tayler in Kermanshah, Iran, on 22 October 1919, to Captain Alfred Tayler and Emily Maude Tayler both British subjects. Her father, who had lost a leg during his service in World War I, met his future wife, a nurse, at the Royal Free Hospital in London where he was recovering from his amputation. The couple moved to Iran, for Alfred to take a job as a clerk for the Imperial Bank of Persia in 1925, the family moved to the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to farm maize and other crops on about 1,000 acres (400 ha) of bush that Alfred bought. In the rough environment, his wife Emily aspired to lead an Edwardian lifestyle. It might have been possible had the family been wealthy; in reality, they were short of money and the farm delivered very little income.

As a girl Doris was educated at the Dominican Convent High School, a Roman Catholic convent all-girls school in the South Rhodesian capital of Salisbury (now Harare). She left school at age 13 and was self-educated from then on. She left home at 15 and worked as a nursemaid. She started reading material that her employer gave her on politics and sociology and began writing around this time.

In 1937, Doris moved to Salisbury to work as a telephone operator, and she soon married her first husband, Frank Wisdom, with whom she had two children (John, born in 1939, and Jean, born in 1943), before the marriage ended in 1943.

After the divorce, Doris' interest was drawn to the community around the Left Book Club, an organisation she had joined the year before. It was here that she met her future second husband, Gottfried Lessing. They married shortly after she joined the group, and had a child together (Peter, born in 1946), before they divorced in 1949. She did not marry again. Lessing also had a love affair with RAF serviceman John Whitehorn (brother of journalist Katharine Whitehorn), who was stationed in Southern Rhodesia, and wrote him ninety letters between 1943 and 1949.

Lessing moved to London in 1949 with her youngest son, Peter, to pursue her writing career and communist beliefs, but left the two elder children with their father Frank Wisdom in South Africa. She later said that at the time she saw no choice.....: "For a long time I felt I had done a very brave thing. There is nothing more boring for an intelligent

woman than to spend endless amounts of time with small children. I felt I wasn't the best person to bring them up. I would have ended up an alcoholic or a frustrated intellectual like my mother."

Doris Lessing's Literary Career-

At the age of 15, in South Africa, Lessing began to sell her stories to magazines. Her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, was published in 1950. The work that gained her international attention, *The Golden Notebook*, was published in 1962. By the time of her death, she had issued more than 50 novels, some under a pseudonym.

In 1982, Lessing published two novels under the literary pseudonym, Jane Somers, to show the difficulty new authors face in trying to get their work printed. The novels were rejected by Lessing's UK publisher, but later accepted by another English publisher, Michael Joseph, and in the US by Alfred A. Knopf. *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* was published in Britain and the US in 1983, and *If the Old Could* in both countries in 1984, both as written by Jane Somers. In 1984, both novels were re-published in both countries (Viking Books publishing in the US), this time under one cover, with the title *The Diaries of Jane Somers: The Diary of a Good Neighbour and If the Old Could*, listing Doris Lessing as author. *The Sweetest Dream* is also a benchmark in English literature.

Lessing declined a damehood (DBE) in 1992 as an honour linked to a non-existent Empire; she had declined an OBE years earlier in 1977. Later she accepted appointment as a Companion of Honour at the end of 1999 for "conspicuous national service". She was also made a Companion of Literature by the Royal Society of Literature.

In 2007, Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. She received the prize at the age of 88 years 52 days, making her the oldest winner of the literature prize at the time of the award and the third-oldest Nobel laureate in any category (after Leonid Hurwicz and Raymond Davis Jr.). She also was only the 11th woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature by the Swedish Academy in its 106-year history.

Lessing was out shopping for groceries when the Nobel Prize announcement came. Arriving home to a gathering of reporters, she exclaimed, "Oh Christ!" "I've won all the prizes in Europe, every bloody one, so I'm delighted to win them all. It's a royal flush." She titled her Nobel Lecture *On Not Winning the Nobel Prize* and used it to draw attention to global inequality of opportunity, and to explore changing attitudes to storytelling and literature. The lecture was later published in a limited edition to raise money for children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. In a 2008 interview for the BBC's *Front Row*, she stated that increased media interest after the award had left her without time or energy for writing. Her final book, *Alfred and Emily*, appeared in 2008.

Socio- Cultural Study of Doris Lessing's Novel:-

The Feminist Interpretation of the Novel The feminist movement, as shown in the first chapter, is concerned with equality between males and females to end women's suffering in the patriarchal society. In this section, the present study is concerned with showing who is the victim, male or female and how the victim sometimes becomes the oppressor enjoying the act of repressing weak people. This shows how feminism sometimes goes to the opposite side

by shifting from supporting woman's rights to the other opposing side. This idea will be presented through illustrating the relationship between Mary and Dick and between Mary and her servants. According to Myles (2004), the situation in *The Grass is Singing* hinges on the man-woman struggle: "The novel unfolds Lessing's anxiety about social, economic and political structures, the problem of women existing in a male-dominated world" (p.25). This critical opinion shows how Lessing is interested in portraying women's suffering especially in a world where women are being repressed.

Mary believes that a woman would normally suffer from the male power in society, even though she admits that she herself does not face this oppression. Mary sees her mother's suffering as a woman by the male power represented by her father. Conversely, she confesses that she never felt this oppression in the traditional Rhodesian society since she has been living freely until she got married to Dick. The narrator states this situation about the male authority and female suffering or living freely through the following quotation:It had never occurred to her that her father, too, might have suffered. "about what?" she would have retorted, had anyone suggested it. "He's a man, isn't he? He can do as he likes." She had inherited from her mother an arid feminism, which had no meaning in her own life at all, for she was leading the comfortable carefree existence of a single woman in South Africa, and she did not know how fortunate she was. How could she know? She understood nothing of conditions in other countries, had no measuring rod to assess herself with (p.32).

Moreover, since she is living in a patriarchal society, she is obliged to get married. In any society, the presence of any woman is associated with the presence of a man in her life. This is an obvious example of the sexism of the societies where unmarried women are criticized for being single and they are accused of being ugly or undesired by men. In contrast, it is normal for males in a society to be single because they can marry at any age while women should marry while they are young and beautiful. The narrator says: "South Africa is a wonderful place: for the unmarried white woman. But she was not playing her part, for she did not get married" (p.35).

Doris Lessing has brought four threads in order to build her multi-thematic novel *The Grass is Singing* in an artistic way. The four themes that she has combined are universal ones which concern any human being who calls for bringing equality between people from different races and genders. Lessing is greatly involved in these issues since she, in some of her works, has addressed these issues in a wider form. In *The Grass is Singing* and *The Golden Notebook*, she mainly focuses on a female character that searches for women's freedom in the patriarchal society. Many feminists have considered Lessing as a feminist since she is interested in women's freedom and women's dream of gaining equality with the males in their societies. Her messages make people understand women's need to act and feel freely without fearing the patriarchal society they live in.

The Golden Notebook was published in 1962 and is one of the best known of Doris Lessing's novels.

The central figure of *The Golden Notebook* is Anna Wulf, a writer from South Africa, living in London, During World War II Anna married a German refugee Max but divorced and then emigrated to London with her daughter Janet. She has a long love affair with Michael and an intense friendship with Molly.

Being about thirty Anna is in a life crisis, disillusioned by communist politics under Stalin, doubting herself and her literary career. Therefore she needs the treatment of a psychotherapist. To get things straightened out with herself she deals them in four independent notebooks, each one has a different colour.

Racism is not a central topic in *The Golden Notebook* but the problem is mentioned when the protagonist, Anna, talks about her successful novel "Frontiers of War" which concerns race relations and forbidden love in southern Africa.

Doris Lessing — herself growing up on a farm in Rhodesia - experienced racism and developed like Anna a strong resistance towards suppression and exploitation of the black natives.

Doris Lessing escaped from this colonial society to London like Anna. There she was confronted with the effects of the Cold War in the 1950s .which are mentioned in the novel just as the dangers of nuclear threats are.

Doris Lessing and Anna were both deeply involved in politics and together with most of their friends they became members of the Communist Party. But trials and atrocities in the Soviet Union and other communist countries or revelations about Stalin's crimes made them develop a feeling of doubt and disappointment towards Communism which was why they broke with communism.

Besides this, *The Golden Notebook* is about feminism. Although Lessing herself claimed in the preface to the book: "This novel was not a trumpet for Women's Liberation" her friends called it "a tract about the sex war".

Anna and Doris Lessing being divorced with a child symbolize "a completely new type of woman" because they "lead what is known as free lives, that is, lives like men,..".

Anna refuses to accept the roles traditionally imposed on women by society. She has to come up with different roles such as the role of the writer, the role of a Communist activist, the role of the working mother and that of a mistress. Having to combine all these roles in the class ridden British post war society brings about identity problems. Anna's "source of self-respect was that she had not - as she put it - given up and crawled into safety somewhere. Into a safe marriage."

By describing troubled relationships throughout the novel the author shows women's dissatisfaction with men. *The Golden Notebook* talks about men's sexual inadequacies, about Anna's and Molly's lovers who are inept and emotionally detached and it shows the devastating effect which such men have on women's lives. What is especially outstanding in this novel is that it discusses openly female sexuality i.e. 'Ella compares vaginal and clitoral orgasm.

Memoirs takes place in an unnamed collapsing city and at an undated time sometime in the future. An unnamed middle-aged narrator is writing her memoirs from a time of which she is a survivor of. She tells the story in retrospect, at the same time as she constantly shares her thoughts and perspectives in the present. What she has survived and how is never specified, but right from the beginning of the novel the narrator refers what she and other survivors have been through as "it", and that her story begins at a time where things are bad, but before "it"; "in the sense of something felt as an immediate threat which could not be

averted". The narrator lives in a "neat and comfortable, if shabby flat", and one day she realises that there is a realm on the other side of the wall of her living-room, a space which overlaps the actual corridor which is behind the wall. She cannot cross over by force, but finds herself on the other side of the wall from time to time, and she realises that what goes on behind the wall might be as important as her life in the "real" world. The rooms behind the wall at this point in the novel are empty and in need of work, but the narrator feels a "sweetness, certainly – a welcome, a reassurance", and also that there is a familiar presence in these rooms, an "exiled inhabitant." One day twelve year old Emily Cartwright and her cat/dog Hugo are left in the narrator's custody without any explanation, and at first the narrator sees Emily as a disturbance that keeps her from moving behind the wall. However, the narrator realises that she has certain responsibilities towards the child, and she begins to observe the polite and insightful girl as she matures rapidly in front of the narrator's eyes. At the same time more and more people gather on the pavement outside the apartment, and more and more people leave the decaying city. One day Emily too moves out to the pavement and joins the new social units that are being formed, and she meets Gerald, a young group leader whom she falls in love with. Emily becomes part of Gerald's house, a new community based on the idea that no one should tell others what to do, and she also becomes part of his "harem", as he is incapable of staying with just one girl. Here Emily also meets June, a girl slightly younger than herself, who also is in love with Gerald, and who leaves Emily and the city in the end without saying goodbye. At the same time the narrator continues to visit the space behind the wall. She discovers the "personal" scenes, scenes which show incidents from Emily's childhood, and the narrator realises that there is a connection between what happens behind the wall and in the "real" world. In the community at Gerald's house and on the pavement Emily shows remarkable skills in leadership and survival, but she and Gerald are unable to keep the community from destruction when Gerald takes on the task as guardian for a savage group of children from the underground, and the community dissolves. Towards the end, the only people left in the city are the narrator, Emily, Hugo, Gerald and the children from the underground, and as Gerald is unable to free himself from his new gang, Emily has to save him as they at one point begin to stone him. They take refuge from the children in the narrator's apartment, and finally the wall dissolves and Emily, Hugo, Gerald and also the children walk through to a garden behind the wall. In the end, everyone but the narrator follows the human figure that the narrator refers to as the One and disappears.

In Doris Lessings's *The Golden Notebook*, during an early discussion of Anna Wulf's struggle with her writer's block, Molly accords Anna the "correct" party-line approval, defining her not as "someone who writes little novels about the emotions" but rather as someone who "writes about what's real". Anna's retort provides a key to the aesthetic that informs the entire Lessing canon: "If Marxism means anything, it means that a little novel

about the emotions should reflect ‘whats’s real’ since the emotions are a function and a product of a society.

Lessing’s first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, is such a “little novel about the emotions” seen through that Marxist lens. Its eschews the endless cataloging of apparently self-perpetuating dislocations psychological and social – that serves as substance for much of what has come to be called modernist literature. Seldom in that literature there is so much as a nod in the direction of the material causes that must at least contribute to the dislocations in question. Even in this, her first and in many ways slightest, effort, rejects the world view of the modernists, preferring instead to portray the dialectical relationship that Marxism insists always exists between the individual circumstances of one’s life and the material nature of the social and economic system within which one lives.

The Golden Notebook is very complex and full of things to be mulled over and discussed. There is much room for advice and discussion, especially in the area of the large assortment of feminist literary and feminist Marxist theory. The Golden Notebook is widely accepted as the modern feminist novel and is a pillar in the female canon.

Marxism plays a large role in Anna’s “real” life and is a large presence in all four of her notebooks. This is a way to examine the effect of class on women in Anna’s and our society. The question of women’s roles in political organization would also be an interesting area and is one that Anna must constantly try to answer for herself. A significant amount of time is also spent discussing Marxist feminist theory. In order to do this one need to have a firmer grasp on the ins and outs of communism, with a particular focus on the communist movement that Anna would have been involved in.

Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* is the metaphor-rich story of a traditional family torn apart by the arrival of an angry, violent, destructive child. As parents Harriet and David struggle to hold together both the family and their own personal values, the narrative draws implied metaphorical parallels between that family's particular experience and the experiences of society in general, along the way also exploring the issues of idealism vs. practicality and the relationship between society and that society perceives as different.

The narrative begins with a description of how the similarly watchful Harriet and David meet at a rowdy office party, immediately realize that they are very much kindred spirits, and make plans to marry and have a large family. Those plans come to fruition sooner than they plan when, on the day they complete the purchase of the large home they want to fill with children, they make love and Harriet conceives their first child.

Lessing's contemporary gothic horror story—centered on the birth of a baby who seems less than human—probes society's unwillingness to recognize its own brutality and with *The Fifth Child* Lessing triumphs in a realm of fiction new to her. She has written an ominously tangible novel, a powerfully simple contemporary horror story that makes compulsive reading to the last word.

Harriet and David Lovatt, parents of four children, have created an idyll of domestic bliss in defiance of the social trends of late 1960s England. While around them crime and unrest surge, the Lovatts are certain that their old-fashioned contentment can protect them from the world outside—until the birth of their fifth baby. Gruesomely goblin-like in appearance, insatiably hungry, abnormally strong and violent, Ben has nothing innocent or infant-like

about him. As he grows older and more terrifying, Harriet finds she cannot love him, David cannot bring himself to touch him, and their four older children are afraid of him. Understanding that he will never be accepted anywhere, Harriet and David are torn between their instincts as parents and their shocked reaction to this fierce and unlovable child whose existence shatters their belief in a benign world.

A driving, desperate desire to develop, live, and maintain an ideal life is the primary intention behind the attitudes and actions of Harriet and David, who design that life according to what they believe to be their fundamental natures and needs. They act on that desire in two ways - by doing what they can and/or need to, and by self-righteously insisting that their families support them both financially and morally. In other words, their idealism blinds them to the practicalities of their world and their life together. Some might say, in fact, that Harriet and David actually bully their families into doing what they want, making them responsible for the practicalities of their (Harriet and David's) idealism.

In the beginning of *Ben, in the World*, Ben Lovatt is 18-years-old and living with an elderly lady named Mrs. Biggs. However, she cannot afford to support the both of them, and sends Ben to his estranged family to ask for his birth certificate so that he can get an unemployment benefit. By the time Ben returns (without the birth certificate), he learns that Mrs. Biggs has passed away. He goes to a couple that had looked after him before he'd met Mrs. Biggs: Rita, a prostitute he'd once had a recurring relationship with, and Johnston, her procurer.

Johnston comes up with a plan to smuggle a large amount of narcotics into France, which would give him and Rita enough money to permanently get off the streets, using Ben. The plan succeeds, and effectively allows him and Rita to cease being responsible for Ben, as they leave him in France under the temporary care of Richard, one of Johnston's men, in an expensive hotel, with a cut from the smuggling deal.

Soon after Richard leaves Ben in the hotel, Ben meets Alex, a film producer who decides to make a film about Ben, set in Rio de Janeiro. He takes Ben to Brazil and introduces Ben to Teresa, an actress who is Alex's girlfriend when he stays in Rio. Teresa grows attached to Ben, and introduces him to Inez (her friend, and a scientist) after Alex abandoned the idea he had of the movie, and Ben himself. This leads to Ben meeting Alfredo, a man who claims to have seen people like Ben before, but doesn't explain where or when.

The book climaxes with the scientific institute Inez works for kidnapping Ben to experiment on, Teresa saving him with the help of Alfredo, and a trek into the mountains of Brazil to see the people who are 'like Ben'.

As it turns out, those people are only rock paintings. Ben is the only person of his species still alive- he is a step backwards in evolution. The crushing despair Ben feels leads him to throw himself off the edge of a cliff, killing him instantly. This is where the novel ends.

Doris Lessing has always been interested in the relationship between the individual and the collective. In this, her twenty- fifth novel, she writes of many individuals and the groups they form, then puts them all into a variety of larger societal and political contexts. As always, Lessing hits hard on global economic politics, particularly on issues of race, poverty, and the lack of adequate leadership from the political hierarchy.

Much of the novel is set in the 1960's in a big, three- story house with a basement apartment located in Hampstead, London, owned by German-born Julia von Arne Lennox. The fact that it is a spacious house changes the lives and fates of a large cast of characters. Julia, recently widowed, invites Frances, the former wife of her only son, Johnny, to come live there with her two sons, Andrew and Colin. Frances does so reluctantly, fearing a loss of independence, but she lacks the money to raise the two boys by herself. "Comrade Johnny" is always more involved with politics and other wives than he is in doing anything so bourgeois as paying child support. After Frances moves in, Julia spends the first few years virtually as a recluse in the four upper-story rooms while Frances and her sons have the rest of the house.

At the end of the novel, most of the group are well accounted for. Some are dead, some are rich. Frances has become a respected writer. They all still know what the others are doing and their lives continue to intersect, despite their varied fates. What they are doing or what they have become through the years may be surprising, yet they have the same personalities they demonstrated in the loose collective of the big house in London.

Conclusion

In her work, Lessing uses her memories of her parents, her neighbours, the farming communities and the people living in the cities of South Rhodesia to create an image of the cultural identity of a colonial society and with that adds to cultural memory and the understanding of that particular cultural memory.

The analyses of Lessing's novels have provided an overview of different aspects of cultural memory studies, such as alternative history, counter-history and nostalgia. In combination with the historical background found in the second chapter, I have given an analysis that is based on memory, fiction and history, and thus follows the idea of cultural memory studies. As cultural memory studies are still developing, it is necessary that more research will be done in the future. Especially concerning colonial and post-colonial writing, I find that not all voices are always heard. There is no reason for denying atrocities of the past; nevertheless, we should also consider that within the group of perpetrators victims might be found as well. This becomes clear when Lessing talks about the role of women in white settler societies. In future research in literature, history or any other area that is interested in cultural dynamics, it should be noted that history and memory are intertwined and cannot be separated. In literature, as well as in politics, cultural memory should be considered as a guideline, helped by a framework of historical facts. In this way, multiple histories and memories can live next to and intertwine with each other in order to create societies and groups that respect each others cultural memories.

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