

**Reinterpretation of Marriage and Motherhood in  
Doris Lessing's *A Proper Marriage***

**Pooja Gupta**  
Research Scholar  
Department of English and  
Other Foreign Languages  
Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith,  
Varanasi.

**Abstract:** *From the very early of human civilization marriage and motherhood exist in our society. Although customs regarding both the systems differ from place to place and time to time yet women's roles and responsibilities have always been imposed by patriarchy. Doris Lessing's novel A Proper Marriage attempts to contrast women's traditional roles with Martha Quest's fight for freedom, equality, divorce and abortion. Through the novel, Lessing disregards the universal notion of happiness in marriage and motherhood and reinterprets them in the contemporary context.*

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Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is recognized as a dignified British author in the realm of English literature. She had touched the pinnacle of literary reputation by her contribution in the fields of novel, drama, poetry, biography libretti and short story for which she was decorated with many awards including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007. The nobility of her identity as an author is accomplished in her critical attitude towards the social reality. With the vision of humanity, she fought and reinterpreted contemporary obsolete social, political and cultural

norms in her writings. Marriage and motherhood are also the two social systems that Lessing found oppressive in many terms. The system of kinship relationship and exchange regularized marriage and the need to enlarge human civilization necessitated motherhood. With the passage of time, the advent of patriarchy differentiated gender roles to maintain power structure between man and women. Since man-woman relationship is basically constructed and defined in the family, marriage and motherhood play a platform for displaying superiority of men and inferiority of women. In the contemporary era, when women are fighting for equal rights, the traditional systems of marriage and motherhood need to be reinterpreted for the betterment of the humanity.

Lessing's *A Proper Marriage* (1954) is the second novel in the *Children of Violence* series. It shows the growth and development of the central figure Martha Quest from her marriage with Douglas Knowell to her leaving him. The title of the novel is very significant in the sense that it makes us think what do we mean by a proper marriage? How can a marriage be proper? Since motherhood is considered as the destiny of marriage, the novel also raises questions about motherhood. Is motherhood is the only end of marriage? Is motherhood the responsibility of women only? Lessing explored answers to all these questions by reinterpreting marriage and motherhood through the life story of Martha from her role of a traditional wife and mother to an independent working woman.

Marriage is such an institution which is considered as necessary for a perfect life yet the concept of marriage is also gender biased. From the childhood, women are made to realize that one day they have to depart to their husband's house. They have to accept this reality whether they like or disgust it. New opportunities in education and jobs are always open to men whereas women are restricted from them due to their domestic and maternal responsibilities after marriage. Even if they work, marriage is their only destination in comparison to men's goal of economic pursuit as Simone de Beauvoir said:

A woman alone...is a socially incomplete being, even if she earns her living; she needs a ring on her finger to achieve the total dignity of a person and her full rights. ...No young man, however, considers marriage as his fundamental project. Economic success is what will bring him to respectable adulthood: it may involve marriage-particularly for the peasant-but it may also exclude it. (Beauvoir, 456)

In such cases, marriage seems to be feeling of being chained. Marriage can be considered as proper only when the patriarchy will be demolished and both men and women will be given equal freedom and responsibilities.

Marriage proves to be improper and oppressive in the case of Martha too. She marries Douglas to escape social criticism but she proves to be foolish. She sacrifices her ambition and liberty to fulfill her feminine gender role of traditional wife. After Marriage, Martha finds herself a prisoner—both physically and mentally—in her husband’s apartment. Martha forcefully goes through the daily routine of ceaseless work involving waiting for Douglas to come home for his lunch, accompanying him to the inevitable sundowner party at 6 p.m. and for his dinner. In 1939, she finds herself conventional just to be a housewife. Her independence, privacy, and political ambitions were still to be satisfied. The marital relationship between Martha and Douglas is also gender oppressive. He lacks the temperament of an ardent lover and a devoted husband. At the first night of his wedding day, he drinks too much and loses his consciousness. When Martha’s friends attend her to her bedroom they see her “taking off Douggie’s shoes and putting him into bed” like a traditional wife (*PM*, 33). He makes her feel that “his satisfaction, his pleasure, was fed less by her than by what other people found in their marriage” (*PM*, 41). She is just a sexual object for him to fulfill his desires. Martha seeks emotional fulfillment but for Douglas, love is more physical than emotional, “that ignored the female which must be wooed, she undoubtedly loathed him from the bottom of her heart, an emotion which was an inevitable followed by a guilty affection” (*PM*, 84). Martha feels subjugated and promises herself to get out of her

married life which now “seemed false and ridiculous” to her (*PM*, 53). She feels that only divorce can save her from this improper marriage.

Marriage provides men the status of god or a sheltering tree so women are always in the fear of losing their husband. In the ancient India, women used to give up their lives upon the pyres of their husband because widows were forced to live miserably and remarriage was not in the custom. Martha was a twentieth century woman yet her life is shattered at the announcement of war. She sees that the young people are not aware of their enemy and the cause of the war yet they are aspiring to put on uniform and prove their courage. All the women are anxious of the life of their father, husband and son. Martha too persuades her husband not to join army, “Martha kept closer to Douglas and demanded the assurance that he did not really want to leave her; just as Stella and Alice were doing in their bedrooms” (*PM*, 92). Although Douglas murmurs to assure her yet in the back of his mind, he wants to escape his boring life.

Marriage snatches women’s personal freedom and enslaves them to the will of their husband, family and society. The novel also depicts that even in the modern age women are not allowed to work outside. Men do not want to see women at the same status of value and adventure. Douglas becomes infuriated when he comes to know that she has joined Red Cross courses for the prospect of war. The cause of his anger is that he cannot bear her to enjoy the same adventure as he expects to enjoy in war. Lessing writes about Douglas:

...he was above all concerned that she should not be in the war—should not go in the pursuit of the adventure he himself was quivering to find; he was even more reluctant because of his own daydreams as to certain aspect of that adventure.  
(*PM*, 123)

Douglas “sound remarks about the unsuitability of danger for women” is just the differentiation from the physical and psychological point of view (*PM*, 123). But Martha is not a woman to be silenced with Douglas’s criticism of women’s participation in men’s world. She

resists his thought by despising and quarreling with him. Douglas succeeds in his dreams and just after his daughter's birth he is sent away to north with his friends Binkie, Parry and all the middle age men including administrators, junior civil servants, executive and clerks. Martha is left alone to be entangled in the chains of motherhood.

Motherhood is also a form of oppression that needs reinterpretation. Women are considered as complete when they become mother. The myth that children are the only justification of marriage glorifies the notion of motherhood. But the glorification of motherhood is also restricted to moral codes of society as Simone de Beauvoir says, "Motherhood in particular is respected only in the married woman; the unwed mother remains an object of scandal, and a child is a severe handicap for her" (Beauvoir, 456). The narration of the story tells that although Martha discovers her pregnancy after marriage but she was already in physical relationship with Douglas and unworried about contraception. Perhaps, her hasty decision of marriage was the result of suspicion about pregnancy and fear of scandal. Yet she has always in her mind that "I'm not going to have a baby, not for years" (*PM*, 28). She does not want to lose her perfect figure and political consciousness but she becomes prey to her biology and the law that does not permit to abort. Although Dr. denies aborting because she is four months pregnant yet she is more shocked at the loss of women's right upon their own body. She says, "Do you mean to say that a woman's not entitled to decide whether she's going to have a baby or not?" (*PM*, 30). Martha becomes one of the victims of illogical law that declared abortion as illegal. It was the effort of Radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone, Ann Oakley and Adrienne Rich during Second wave feminism that rights of reproduction and abortion was voiced and legalized.

People praise motherhood as a special event in woman's life. Beauvoir says, "Indeed, from childhood woman is repeatedly told she is made to bear children, and praises of motherhood are sung" (Beauvoir, 545). She rejects the universal notion of joy because the feeling of motherhood is directed by the existing social, economic and psychological condition

of the mother. The case of Martha also contrasts with the universal notion about motherhood because it is “a feeling of being caged and trapped” for her (*PM*, 43). Martha reinterprets maternity as a dark sea upon which she has to burn the lamp of her free spirit. She feels herself fractured and waits for the moment of liberation:

She was essentially divided. One part of herself was sank in the development of the creature...with the other parts she watched it; her mind was like a lighthouse, anxious and watchful that she, the free spirit, should not be implicated; and engaged in daydreams of the exciting activities that could begin when she was liberated. (*PM*, 168)

Motherhood and child rearing are considered as the responsibilities of women only while men are thought to be free from it. According to Ann Oakley, mothering and child rearing are based upon the myth that “all women need to be mothers, all mothers need their children, all children need their mothers” (Oakley, 186). Oakley assumes that by the socialization of women through family, schools, religions and media women are realized that all women need to be mothers and they will feel frustrated if their maternal instinct will not be satisfied. The myth that children need their mothers unnecessarily ties women to children under biological myth. Thus motherhood is a bestowed quality. Martha too suffers from a forced motherhood. She lacks motherly feelings so takes care of her baby according to the instructions of the nurse, Sister Doll and books. The pain of whole motherhood can be felt in the conversation of Martha with her baby, “Well, then, so it’s right and proper you should hate my guts off and on, you and I are just victims, my poor child, you can’t help it, I can’t help it, my mother couldn’t help it, and her mother” (*PM*, 266). Martha feels bound in the repetitive gender roles while Douglas feels happy to be free from the responsibilities of parenting and the atmosphere of cries, bottles and napkins. In her beautiful philosophical conversation with her little Caroline, Martha expresses her inner crushed desires for freedom. In contrast to her present condition, she promises an unhampered bright future to her daughter:

Two years ago, I was as free as air. I could have done anything, been anything... You'll imagine yourself doing all sorts of things in all sorts of countries; the point is, your will will be your limit. Anything will be possible. But you will not see yourself sitting in a small room bound for twenty-four hours of the day—with your years of it in front of you—to a small child. (*PM*, 267-268)

Martha becomes disturbed when just after three years of her first baby; people begin to make pressure upon her for the second baby. Douglas and Mrs. Quest suggest that the second baby will be a good company for Caroline. For some times, she too imagines for the next maternity but her desire for freedom disallows her imagination, "Being a mother, or rather, the business of looking after a child, as distinct from carrying and giving birth to one, was not a fulfillment but a drag on herself" (*PM*, 330). She is unable to understand the logic of her mother that not having another baby is selfishness.

The long absence of Douglas from her life creates a space to be filled with romantic imagination. She feels attracted towards Thomas Bryant, an Air Force man but as a truthful wife she ignores his company and "shuts the door against her own release" (*PM*, 238). She also false in love with William but does not sacrifices her morality in the absence of her husband. When Douglas returns, he finds William in Martha's room and begins to suspect her wife's immorality but Martha is pure. The narration itself does not reflect any love scene between Martha and William. She is much better than her husband who himself had love affair during the war period but tries to show himself as saint. When she is suspected of her love affair, she accepts it with guts, "I propose to have a love affair with him. Since you've been having an affair with Mollie in Y—, I don't see why you should object" (*PM*, 396). Lessing wants to show the double standard of the society that does not acknowledge men's immorality but takes a noose upon women's character very soon.

She decides to resist this repetitive gender and class oppression for herself in future. She has already worked for Help for Our Allies, a committee which works for the benefits of the

Blacks of the country. She also works for Roman Catholic Church in organizing a concert of the coloured children to entertain the Whites and get charity. Lessing writes that it is the time for her to come in her true form, “For at this moment she forgot the years of feminine compliance, of charm, of conformity of what he wanted. They had all been a lie against her real nature and therefore they had not existed” (*PM*, 399). She confesses to Mrs. Talbot:

I’m not properly married. I’m bored, bored, bored, you can’t imagine. I can’t bear it. I haven’t anything in common with Douglas, and I’ve been unhappy all the time. (*PM*, 417)

She decides to leave Douglas and her daughter Caroline for an independent life, “I’m going to drop my things in my room, look for a job, and then—there are five hundred envelopes to be addressed before tomorrow morning” (*PM*, 446). Martha chooses to work because it is through it that woman can close the gap between man and women as Beauvoir believed that “The system based on her dependence collapses as soon as she ceases to be a parasite; there is no need for a masculine mediator between her and the universe” (Beauvoir, 737). Martha’s decision to free herself from unsatisfactory social systems—marriage and motherhood opens a way for women to make judgment for themselves.

To conclude, we can say that Lessing has advocated that marriage should not be considered as necessary. If marriage is necessary, let it depend upon the equality and freedom of the two selves—husband and wife. Douglas’s neglecting and infidelity towards Martha creates a vast gap between them. Even the birth of Caroline could not fill the space between their improper marital relationships. If Douglas had loved her, supported her in parenting and given her chance to fulfill her political aspiration, the end would have had been different. In the same way, motherhood neither should be forced nor be renounced. It should be controlled according to the wish of women as Shulamith Firestone and Adrienne Rich believed that if women take control of reproduction and do childrearing from feminist value, they will resist patriarchy and experience biological motherhood on their own terms. Adrienne Rich rightly says:



Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications...In order to live a fully human life we require not only *control* of our bodies (though control is prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporal ground of our intelligence. (Rich, 31-32)

Martha “becomes tied to marriage and motherhood through the social and biological demands on her as a woman. Her sexual needs and her longing for love make her submissive and compliant in relation to men” yet she does not feel it intelligent to sacrifice her life for an unfaithful husband (Holmquist, 171). Although Martha suffered yet like a new woman she renovated her repressed spirits for her personal and social reforms. Thus the novel gives a new direction to deconstruct and reinterpret marriage and motherhood.

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