



**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN THE WORKS OF
DORIS LESSING**



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ABSTRACT

To become a true scholar on the subject of the Doris Lessing protagonist is to accept the roles of her protagonists, despite their likelihood to be female, without definition or resolution. To achieve a sense of Doris Lessing's purpose is to accept the idea that an institutionalized purpose is preposterous, despite her common themes of madness. To appreciate Doris Lessing from a literary stance is to accept her word that she writes

without any feminist persuasion. As Katherine Fishburen said, "Through the metaphor of her fiction, we learn that the meaning of the world eludes us if we try, by constitutionalizing or labeling it, to pin it down" (qtd in Kaplan 90). Doris Lessing believed that instead of attempting to explain the world, we should simply experience it, and her characters reinforce this idea.

KEYWORDS

Doris Lessing, autobiography, Africa, injustice, prejudice

RESEARCH PAPER

Doris Lessing was a great observer, and she was deeply affected by the oppression in Africa. As a teen, Doris Lessing was acutely aware of the unfair imposition of the white settlers

Into these deserts, completely cut off from modern life, are forcibly herded people whose way of life before the white man came was as wide, variegated, full of potential, as Africa itself. The white people began to steal the land as soon as they arrived in the country. (qtd. In Roze 2)

Claiming as much independence as possible for a teenage female in the early 1900s, Lessing attempted to attack the issue of prejudice by recording in writing the injustices she witnessed. Many of these experiences contributed to her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) in which the theme of the novel is based on “a white outpost in a remote colony” (Rowe 14). The influence of her African upbringing carried over into her adult life as Doris Lessing eventually assumed an active role as a political active role as a political activist and critic of her childhood home.

The native Rhodesians viewed the white settlers as thieves stealing their land, but many of the settlers, including the Taylers, considered themselves British, white landowners with an obligation to civilize the untamed land (Rowe 2), In later

on the native Rhodesians. After having read Lawrence Vambe’s *An Ill-fated People : Zimbabwe Before and After Rhodes*, in her youth Lessing noted :

reflections, Lessing asserts that the white settlers of Rhodesia were not rugged and resourceful people, but rather a collective British society, trying to create an identical reflection of their homeland (Rowe2). Because this British society refused to assimilate and work in conjunction with the natives, these settlers found only failure as farmers on a foreign land. Lessing felt that their efforts to civilize the natives resulted in actually raping a long-standing established community of its personal identity. In “Flavors of Exile,” Lessing illustrates her own mother’s desire to create a bit of England for herself; her mother desperately wants to use the same type of vegetation as she did in England, but it is obvious that Lessing does not share her mother’s desires;

Further, Doris Lessing strongly opposed the hierarchies that formed,

not only as a result of food and material possessions, but on a much larger social and cultural scale. Lessing was infuriated by the prejudices that were commonly directed at any non-Christian, non-white, or non-Northern European person. As more British settlers arrived to claim their fortune as landowners, the white community found strength in numbers and oppression of the natives ensued. Shopkeepers, Jews, Indians, and Greeks were accepted by the British community only as “necessary evils” (Rowe 3). In addition to reflecting her disapproval of such prejudice in her first novel *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing’s position is also made clear in *Martha Quest* (1952), as Martha notes, “For what is community if not people who share their experience?” Despite her young age, the violent and non-ethical imposition of the white settlers greatly conflicted with Doris Lessing’s strong sense of justice.

Just as Maude Tayler felt obligated to create her own microcosm of British society, Doris Lessing was committed to a sense of social responsibility and “To a pursuit of those oppressed by society” (Bloom 18). Lessing found herself, however, devoted particularly to those whose spirit is actively suffocated by some source of

apprehension, not necessarily to the stereotypical minority. Despite their minority status as females, middle-class women who lack interest in political issues and substantial social responsibilities are treated harshly in Lessing’s works. Because Lessing has stipulations for her devotions, she refuses to commit to any one group, goal, or idea for a long period of time. This refusal to commit or confine oneself is a common characteristic of Lessing’s protagonist, as this will be illustrated more thoroughly upon examining her works. Thus it is ironic that critics such as James Gindin should describe Doris Lessing as “intensely committed to active persuasion to reform society (Bloom 9). Apparently, Lessing’s commitment is to change, action, and reform, rather than a commitment to an organized party, which has the potential for stagnation.

Allegedly due to a recurring eye problem, Doris quit her formal education at the age of fourteen (Rowe 9). Her eye problem did not, however, prevent her from constantly reading and continuing her education according to her own interests. As it is said that Mrs. Tayler was displeased with Doris’s decision to quit her formal education, it is possible that the

eye problem existed only through Doris's testimony. Because of her limited experience with formal education, Doris Lessing is credited with shaping herself as an intellectual (Rowe 8). Lessing did not always read for enjoyment, nor did she read to be persuaded by the writer; rather, Lessing absorbed as much material as possible in order to gain knowledge of the world in which she participated. She studied mostly nineteenth-century literature, which is attributed to her ethical concerns, as well as contemporary political works, such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (Rowe 7). In "The Small Person Voice." Lessing offers her literary preferences when she says, "For me the highest point of literature was the novel of the nineteenth century, the work of Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Turgenev, Chekhov; the works of the great realists" (Voice 4); It is said that *The Golden Notebook* is written with striking similarities in form to these novels of the nineteenth century (Bloom 75).

Absent from her list of influences is representation from nineteenth-century British novelists. Lessing dismisses the Victorian period in her "Preface" of *The Golden Notebook* by saying, "But a very useful Victorian novel never got

itself written.... There isn't one novel that has the vigour and conflict of ideas in action that is in a good biography of William Morris" (Notebook xi). Lessing rejects the Victorian period for its ideology, which produced her parents and their values. It is also said that upon her return to England in 1949. Lessing was treated as a colonial and was thus shunned by British literary figures (Rowe 8). Perhaps for reasons of spite and principle, Lessing credits her literary foundation to non-British ancestors.

In opposition to her claims, Doris Lessing's political preferences and personal views chronologically coincide with the themes of her literary works. Lessing's interest in politics eventually led to her involvement in communist activities, which ultimately influenced her own literary works. Lessing became extremely active in the Marxist movement prior to the culmination of World War II. Lessing scholar Molly Hite claims that *The Golden Notebook* is novel-length "critique of Marxist ideology" (qtd in Kaplan 14). Frederick Stern, however, boldly asserts that "Lessing's commitment from the beginning of her work Was not to Marxist thought and its revolutionary components but rather to radical humanist thought"

(qtd in Kaplan 14). Despite the difference in scholarly opinion, Lessing was undoubtedly active in the Communist arena during the early portion of her writing career.

Furthermore, Lessing's experience with Communist activities and ideology are present in her earliest works, and most notably in *Retreat to Innocence*, which was published in 1956, after *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*, but before *A Ripple from the Storm*. According to Frederick C. Stern, Lessing was in the process of disassociating with her Communist circle while writing *Retreat to Innocence* (Kaplan 47). One of the novel's main characters, Jan Broad, is said to have been the most convincing and appealing Communist in Lessing's works. This character is representative of the firm belief Lessing once had in Communist ideology. Like many of Lessing's male figures, Broad is a charming and vivacious European Jew. Jan Broad is a convinced Communist, despite his concern about his best friends' execution by the Party, as well as the red type that hinders his own journey home (Kaplan 46). Although Broad is aware of the faults within the Party, he remains devoted to Communism and adheres to the position that "the Party is always right"

(Kaplan 46). By 1956, however, it is believed that Lessing had already begun her severance from this ideology, and it is possible that Jan Broad most likely characterizes the disillusionment she experienced through the Communist party (Kaplan 47).

Furthermore, it has been noted by Lessing scholars that many parallels can be drawn between Lessing and her protagonist Martha Quest. For example, Lessing's views on formal education are also briefly expressed in *Martha Quest* through Martha's preference for independent reading and self-enrichment over rigid exams (Rowe 9).

With substantial reason, Doris Lessing is often compared to another acclaimed female writer, George Eliot. Like Lessing, Eliot was considered to be self-taught. Neither writer attended a formal college or university, and both found intellectual stimulation through a radical circle of friends (Rowe 10). Eliot was involved with *The Westminster Review*, and Lessing was active in a communist group after her return to Salisbury. Because both writers found their family values to be unsettling, Eliot and Lessing became actively and fervently involved in various movements throughout their

lives, often radically changing their personal stances (Rowe 10). By comparing Eliot's *Middlemarch* to Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, it is apparent that both writers struggled with a resistance toward the feminist movement and the suffocation of oppression (Rowe 10). Lessing has been most concerned with overcoming her feminist identity in order to represent a strong individualist identity.

In 1938 Doris relocated to Salisbury to work as a telephone operator. It was at this time in her life that she began writing, mostly as a result from her involvement with a progressive, young, and intellectual crowd. This group of young people frequented the Sports Club, which was the banal site for many sequences in *Children of Violence* (Rowe 11). The following year Lessing married her first husband, Frank Wisdom, whom she met through her societal circle. Wisdom was a civil servant and the father of her first two children, John and Jean, who remained with their father after their parents' divorce in 1943. Lessing accredits her first divorce to her participation in the Marxist movement; she was simply overwhelmed with the ennui of the suburban married life. Following her divorce, Lessing became involved with

a group of European immigrants and RAF members who were actively involved with the social unrest in Southern Rhodesia. From her association with this second movement, Lessing received political enlightenment. The essence of her political education is captured in *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, and *The Golden Notebook* (Rowe 11). Once again, it was her involvement in and departure from these diverse groups that shaped her character as one who refuses to commit to any one idea or movement. Rather, Lessing is committed only to change.

In 1945 she married Gottfried Anton Lessing, a comrade in Marxism and a German refugee as well, and bore her third child, Peter. This marriage ultimately ended as Lessing's second and final divorce. With her son, fresh divorce papers, and a manuscript of her first novel, she returned to England in 1949. Lessing wanted to earn her living as a writer, and she published her first work *The Grass Is Singing* in 1950. Reflective of her childhood experiences with racial prejudice, *The Grass Is Singing* is a story about a white land owner's wife, their black servant, and the violence that results from this relationship. Lessing

continued to support herself and her son through the publication of *Children of Violence*. *Children of Violence* is a quintet consisting of *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954), *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), *Landlocked* (1965), and *The Four – Gated City* (1969).

Following the successful *Children of Violence* series, Lessing wrote *The Golden Notebook* in 1962 which has become her most famous literary work. It is this novel that proposes such a seemingly strong feminist stance that it has been used repeatedly as a reference work by the Women's Movement. Since 1962, however, Doris Lessing has refused the proposal that the feminist stance portrayed in this novel is a reflection of her own beliefs. Based on the undeniably autobiographical nature of her literary works, many critics in turn, reject Lessing's claims.

Furthermore, Doris Lessing prefers to ignore the comparison of her works to her background as a source of her thoughts. Rather, Lessing believes that much can be learned from what is classified as madness, as this belief is often an overt theme in her works. Relationships, oppression and societal expectations are often the source of this madness, as the three protagonists

of her works, Susan Rawlings of "To Room Nineteen," Anna Freeman Wulf of *The Golden Notebook*, and Anna Freeman of *Play with a Tiger*, experience. Again, those who would link Lessing with a feminist movement point to these themes as indication of the position of women and their reaction to their status.

Perhaps due to her analytical nature, Doris Lessing offers insight into the meaning of her works in the names she carefully chooses for her protagonists. The most obvious examples can be seen in Anna Freeman Wulf of *The Golden Notebook*. Anna Wulf is derived from Virginia Woolf, with whom both Anna and Lessing share a commitment to writing, a desire for solitary room in which to write and an inclination towards madness (Pickering 93). In both examples, Anna Freeman boldly represents their status as "free women" It has also been proposed that Lessing's multiple use of Ana is ironically symbolic of Anna LiviaPlurabelle, the archetypal mother (Pickering 93). This proposal appears reasonable as the role of the mother is a frequent issue among Lessing's protagonists. In the view of the protagonist, this role is most often stifling to the protagonist's character' therefore, Lessing's reference to an

archetypal mother could be a deliberate irony. In addition to the obvious fact that Lessing's protagonist is almost always female, she adds dimension to their character by the symbolism incorporated into their names.

In each name Doris chooses for her protagonist, she may also offer a glimpse of her own personal character. None of these three fictional women fits the mold of the socially accepted female role, and all three suffer psychologically as a result. Anna Freeman Wulf, the protagonist in *The Golden Notebook*, is considered "by far one of the most consciously self critical and analytical women in modern fiction" (Bloom 45). Anna, a single mother and self-sufficient writer, is capable of acknowledging her broken mold: "Free women They still define us in terms of relationship with men, even the best of them" (*Notebook 4*). Although she is fully aware of her independence she is constantly searching for meaning. Anna expresses this state of chaos when she says, "Men, Women, Bound, Free, Good, Bad, Yes, No, Capitalism, Socialism, Sex, Love" (*Notebook 4*). She is not the typical housewife; therefore, society suggests that something must be wrong with her. Anna would like to envision herself as

prolific writer of great thought, able to make a difference in the bigger picture through her writing. In reality, Anna cannot concern herself with the "General breakdown in Western Society" (Pickering 90), as she is consumed by the incoherence in her own life. Because Anna is gripped by an overwhelming fear of fragmentation she mentally suffers in a world of writer's block.

Doris Lessing often uses a female counterpart as a foil to the female protagonist for the purpose of creating character by comparison. For example, in the first act of *Play with a Tiger* Lessing adds the brief appearance of Janet Stevens, an American girl who is pregnant with Dave's child, and Lessing presents Stevens specifically to further define her protagonist. Earlier in the scene, Anna had declared her thoughts about Dave when she said, "Dave shouldn't have picked on me. I'm economically independent. I have no urge for security so I don't have to sell myself out" (*Play 216-217*). Serving as the foil for Anna, Janet soon enters the scene and tries in desperation to explain her relationship with Dave, as well as the meaning of her visit :

But I say to him, Dave, if you work at marriage then it is a career.....

Sometimes he makes fun because I took domestic science and home care and child care as my subjects in college, but I say to him, Dave, marriage and the family is the most rewarding career a woman can have ...

Janet's remarks show the reader the parallels between Anna's and Janet's relationship with Dave. As childish and unattainable as Janet's wishes sound to Anna, she cannot contend with the fact that her desire for Dave, despite the different terms, is as passionate and unattainable as Janet's. The different terms lie only between Janet's willingness to be honest with herself and with others, and Anna's insistence on lying to herself and to others by playing Dave's desired role of the independent female. Following this brief encounter with Janet, Anna is left feeling foolish and frustrated, and a corner of her façade has been lifted. Lessing has revealed that in all of Anna's self-deceit, she is truly a weaker character than her American counterpart.

Another example of a female counterpart for the purpose of characterization is found in Lessing's "A Man and Two Women." The character of the protagonist, Stella, is developed through her interactions with the perception of her best friend, Dorothy Bradford. Lessing begins the short story with a history of their

friendship, which includes their husbands. Lessing deliberately avoids naming Stella's husband, who is presently absent from this particular scene, until much later in the short story; in this way Lessing can focus on "a man and two women." Despite the fact that both couples are artists, Stella is quick to point out the fact that she and Dorothy's husband, Jack, are the only two who have truly been discovered (Man and Two 97-98). When making this assertion, Stella says, "All the same, there was that been him and Stella, just as there was between Jack and his wife" (Man and Two 98).

Upon entering the Bradfords' small cottage, Stella is extraordinarily observant of Dorothy, who has just begun the confinement of motherhood with six-month-old son. Once again. Lessing uses the rite of motherhood as a turning point for mental destruction, for Dorothy is immediately changed by the added presence of a child. Dorothy openly reveals her repression, as she says, "Having a baby killed everything creative in me—quite different from being pregnant" (Man and Two 103).

In her mental state, Dorothy becomes oddly agitated with Jack and Stella's relationship; she goes so far so as to suggest a romantic involvement. At the same time, Stella is keenly observing Dorothy's interactions with her newborn son and her husband, who is obviously very much in love with his wife. Ironically, Stella becomes painfully envious of Dorothy's relationships, although Dorothy is simultaneously making sordid insinuations. Lessing creates this irony for the purpose of characterization, as Stella's character is primarily developed through her relationship with Dorothy. Using *Play Wish a Tiger* and "A Man and Two Women" as examples, characterization by comparison is clearly a literary tool commonly used by Lessing.

Thus, Lessing bristles when others suggest definite and invariable meanings for her works.

Viewing formal education a massive critic, Lessing attacks the educational system, which she proudly escaped at age fourteen, for its role as the oppressor of "imaginative and original judgment" (Notebook xvi). She is extremely troubled by those who attempt to teach single and definitive meanings of her works, as she thus accuses teachers and professors of

playing the pretentious role of the critic. Furthermore, Lessing accuses the critics of establishing the academic canon, which she finds worthless and inhibiting (Rowe 114).

Lessing's fame and notoriety balance her lack of education, for she is undeniably respected as a literary figure. Lessing's stance on auto-didacticism has been supported and strengthened through the year by the establishment of a literary society in her honor, known as the Doris Lessing Society, as well as a publication. The *Doris Lessing Newsletter*. Most of the scholar who belong to this society claim to have been influenced by her writing on a personal level, and thus appreciate Lessing's work more thoroughly and wholly than merely its literary value. John Carey, who has been noted for writing the first doctoral dissertation on Lessing in 1965, claims, "The Golden Notebook had a profound effect on my life and influenced me in a number of personal ways" (qtd in Kaplan 9). Paul Schlueter, another Lessing scholar, emerged in the sixties as a key figure in the organization of the Doris Lessing Society. Schlueter was assigned *The Golden Notebook* in a graduate course and was taken by its relevance to his personal life. Schlueter

said, “I was amazed at how much it spoke to me and my own situation, nearing the pressure point ... in my first marriage” (qtd in Kaplan 11). Despite Schlueter’s male perspective, the institution of marriage is a common thread among Lessing scholars.

However, despite what the scholars and critics may suggest, it is dangerous to categorize Doris Lessing’s style and beliefs into a single literary stance.

How can we respond to the challenges Lessing puts before us as critics ? How could we be Lessing readers—especially all of us women who are teaching in universities – without worrying about the question, and not only about our criticism, but about our participation in the institutions, about our lives ? What kind of criticism can we write, especially since Lessing covers everything herself ?” (qtd in Kaplan 11)

Those scholars who have tried to establish the “Definitive word” (Kaplan 13) on Lessing have been scorned by their contemporaries, who have resigned the search to the impossibility of the absolute definition, as well as scorned by Lessing herself.

Marchino’s question regarding the teaching of Lessing’s works was responded to by another Lessing scholar, Katherine Fishburn, who wrote an essay titled “Teaching Doris Lessing as a Subversive Activity: A Response to the ‘Preface’ to The Golden Notebook” (Kaplan 81). Fishburn views the augmented Preface

Doris Lessing has spent her entire life vehemently denying these single literary stances, and it is this ambiguous and flippant persona that has intrigued her readers for four decades. In volume 2, number 2 of the 1976 Doris Lessing Newsletter, Lois Marchino begins her article, “Life, Lessing, and the Pursuit of Feminist Criticism,” with a series of questions :

as a challenge to teach The Golden Notebook within the parameters Lessing has set, which is teaching it without imposing or suggesting a single meaning. Because Lessing takes the stance that the educational system is based on indoctrination, where students are subordinate to their superiors and the opinions of the superiors rule, Fishburn has approached the teaching of this novel as a “dialectical teaching story designed to subvert and thus transform our precipitations of the world” (Kaplan 84) Despite Lessing’s warning in her “Preface,” Fishburn encourages others to accept the challenge and

teach *The Golden Notebook* as an opportunity to exercise free through. Furthermore, Fishburn states boldly enough that she refutes the notion that Lessing's works are didactic; rather, Fishburn describes Lessing's style as "Socratic" (Kaplan 83). Fishburn claims that despite Lessing's denouncement of formal education, Lessing does assume the role of a teacher to her strong following of highly-educated literary scholars. Fishburn argues that Lessing's method of teaching is that "she engages her readers in a progressive dialogue that leads them through a series of multiple realities to a new view of the world" (qtd in Kaplan 83). Although Lessing is not a teacher in the setting of formal education, she is undeniably a teacher in literary subversion. Finally, Fishburn suggests that by degrading the role of the teacher and critic, Lessing is, thus, degrading her own role as a literary figure (Kaplan 83). In the opinion of the Lessing critic, the complexity of the Lessing protagonist is not only the result of her writing ability, but also her refusal to allow definitive characteristics for her protagonists. This complexity can be attributed to their constant metamorphosis, which usually involves a shift in character, such as

Susan Rawling's shift from stable to insane, Anna Freeman's shift from independent to codependent, and Dorothy Bradford's shift from being free to being confined. The only true consistency among Lessing's protagonists is their change in spirit. In both her personal life and literary works, the only safe characterization of Doris Lessing is dynamic. Doris Lessing is not without purpose; however, her scholars and critics often dwell solely on the nexus between writer and work and neglect the opportunity for introspection. Introspective independence is Lessing's ammunition, as close-minded stagnation is her enemy. This critic believes that Lessing's works should be read for the insight that is gained from searching within oneself for meaning. Furthermore, this critic feels that Lessing's protagonists are only complex if the reader is resistant to change. They accept the realism of the mental and emotional metamorphosis that is common among all humans is to truly accept the Lessing protagonists.

To become a true scholar on the subject of the Doris Lessing protagonist is to accept the roles of her protagonists, despite their likelihood to be female, without definition or

resolution. To achieve a sense of Doris Lessing's purpose is to accept the idea that an institutionalized purpose is preposterous, despite her common themes of madness. To appreciate Doris Lessing from a literary stance is to accept her word that she writes without any feminist persuasion. As Katherine Fishburen said, "Through

the metaphor of her fiction, we learn that the meaning of the world eludes us if we try, by constitutionalizing or labeling it, to pin it down" (qtd in Kaplan 90). Doris Lessing believed that instead of attempting to explain the world, we should simply experience it, and her characters reinforce this idea.

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