



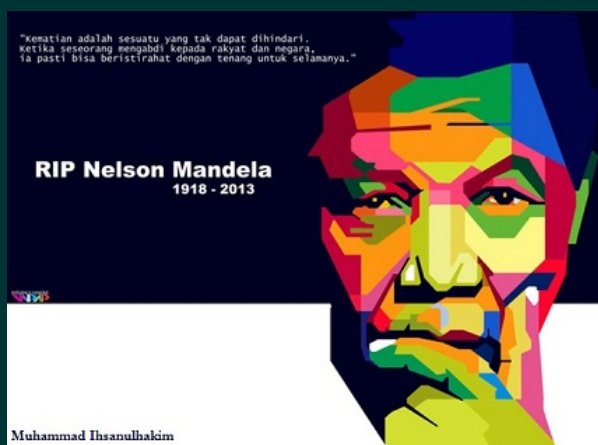
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Doris Lessing's Fiction: Literature as Commitment

Ester Gendusa

The publication of *The Grass Is Singing* in 1950 inaugurated the long and distinguished literary career of Doris Lessing (1919 – 2013), the 2007 Nobel laureate for literature, who, in 1964, defined herself “a writer by temperament” (Newquist 1964: 415). The novel, written when Lessing was twenty-five years old, proves to be highly anticipatory in that it displays several interconnected thematic correspondences with the main motifs informing its author’s entire production and testifies to the oppositional, if not subversive, nature of her works with respect to the normative symbolic foundations of society buttressed within official discourse in England and its colonies from the 1950s onward. Moreover, the “eclectic realism” (Splendore 2000, my translation) characterizing the novel’s formal aspect paves the way to Lessing’s future aesthetic experimentalism and stylistic innovations.

Set in an unspecified southern African country, *The Grass Is Singing* foregrounds the social as well as political commitment constantly underpinning Lessing’s production, which she sees as the unavoidable ethical responsibility of literature.¹

¹ It is imperative to underline that, far from identifying the ethic moment of literary production with an uncritical recuperation of traditional values, Lessing affirms that it corresponds to any writer’s responsibility to become not only a vehicle for change but also the interpreter of his/her contemporaries’ anxiety and expectations. On that point, see D. Lessing (1974).



In this respect, Katherine Fishburn argues that:

For Doris Lessing writing has always involved a special kind of commitment to other people, a commitment that allows her to function as their artistic representative, taking their side and speaking out when they cannot. Thus at one time or another she has written about the disaffections of the lower class, the stifled rebellions of middle-class women, the disenfranchisement of African blacks and the abuses of the mentally ill (Fishburn 1987: 5).

1. WHITE POST-COLONIAL LITERATURE: ISSUES OF "RACE" AND GENDER

Centred on the life experience of Mary Turner, *The Grass Is Singing*, at the time of its publication, broke new ground as it focused on the deeply contradictory nature of the social positioning of white women in colonial Africa: the result of criss-crossing tensions arising from their being subordinate subjects within the dominating group of the colonizers. Indeed, while being active agents of imperialist practices, white colonial women were also subject to the Law of the Father, which found its main expression in a rigid policy of control on their sexuality. As well as foregrounding the pervasiveness of a gender-biased power system, the novel also delineates an innovative figuration of the colonial woman whose sexual drives, far from being unrecognized, are given visibility and, more importantly, are depathologized. Mary is indeed depicted as constantly aware of her corporeal sensations, although, it is true, her brooding over them is more than often a cause of disquiet:

Her feeling was one of a strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even – though this she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledge – of some dark attraction (Lessing 2000: 154).

In her subsequent novels, while giving a voice to those who would tend to be silenced, Lessing turned writing into a privileged site of corrosive social criticism in which she stigmatised numerous forms of oppression, including those that the establishment obscures or secretly condones.

Although brought up within an English family in colonial Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Lessing developed a critical attitude towards the social reality she lived in as a young woman. This allowed the writer to distance herself from the cultural construction of racial superiority cherished by most of white colonists in colonial Africa. However, a strong social conditioning prevented her from establishing authentic relationships with the Africans. As Lessing put it:

The African told stories, but we weren't allowed to mix with them. It was the worst part about being there. I mean, I could have had the most marvellous rich



experience as a child. But it would be inconceivable for a white child. [...] There was a total color bar. [...] The only contact I had with blacks was what I had with servants (Frick 1996: 156-157).

Nevertheless, Lessing managed to absorb some elements of African culture which, together with the knowledge of the physical environment she acquired during her adolescence, prevented her fiction from both depicting African nature as exotic and romanticizing African people, thus challenging the paternalistic approach characterizing most Western literature set in the colonies. Chosen as her spiritual homeland, Africa will constitute one of the central inspiring motifs of her first works, such as *The Grass Is Singing* and the first four novels of the Martha Quest's pentalogy, *Children of Violence* (1952–1969), where Lessing investigates the racial issue.

If Lessing's first novel was inspired by the experience of poor white colonists in Africa, in the abovementioned pentalogy she will explore the colonial middle-class society, which will allow her to unveil and challenge their racist politics. The novels which constitute the *Children of Violence* series – *Martha Quest*, *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, *Landlocked* e *The Four-Gated City* – may be viewed as forming a *Bildungsroman* in that they are centred around the progressive acquisition of self-awareness on the part of their protagonist, Martha. If it is true that, from a stylistic point of view, the first volumes appear to adhere to the conventional realistic mode of writing, their thematic motifs nonetheless allow Lessing to delineate the figure of a teenager – and, gradually, of a woman – who challenges social conventions and, in particular, her parents' puritan snobbism. Lessing thus outlines Martha's pursuit of a personal, non-conformist life style within an African context which witnesses her becoming an adult through her adolescent concerns and through her first encounters with the opposite sex.

Inspired by Lessing's personal experience of militancy within Salisbury's Communist Party, the character of Martha acts as Lessing's spokeswoman in condemning not only the British colonial rule but also the marginalization of the weakest social groups that the colonial regime reinforces.² In the last novel of the series, in exploring the experiences of those individuals that official discourse labels as

² Martha's everyday life, however, does not entail any authentic interaction with the Black members of the Communist party. The same contradiction is reflected in Lessing's personal experience of communist militancy. Indeed, if it is true that, as she put it when interviewed by Jonah Raskin, Salisbury Communist Party "ignored the color bar", so that "white and black people worked together on the basis of equality" (Raskin 1996: 16), in another interview Lessing rectifies this position and states that: "You couldn't have a really equal relationship with a black person. We did have a kind of political relationship, but they were not equal. If you are meeting black people who have to be home at nine o'clock to beat the curfew while you sit around in the office when they've gone and you can go to a restaurant they can't go to, no amount of ideology is going to turn this into an equal relationship" (Thorpe 1996: 101).



mentally unstable, Lessing uncovers society's need for classificatory labels, which, she suggests, are devoid of legitimacy.

The antibourgeois tones that permeate these early works quickly determine her association, by the British literary critics of the time, with the Angry Young Men's contemporary protest. However, if, on the one hand, Lessing praises the literary renewal introduced by the group in terms of representational practices, on the other, in her essay "The Small Personal Voice", she will refuse this identification due to certain a limiting provincialism that in her view could be detected in the thematic horizon of their works.³

Meanwhile, Lessing is banned for twenty-five years from Rhodesia (and South Africa) due to her explicit opposition to the white minority government ruling the country during Ian Smith's regime, thus becoming one of the voices of that "white" Africa which strongly expressed their political identification with the black majority. The most immediate sensations Lessing experienced when, in 1956, she was refused entry into the Union of South Africa were recorded in her article "Being Prohibited" (Lessing 1956).

As Lessing herself foregrounds (Torrents 1996), her subsequent works are characterized by most of the thematic motifs that can already be detected in *The Grass Is Singing*, including further autobiographical references, the condemnation of racism and forms of socially condoned oppression, as well as a constant concern with feminist issues. It is precisely Lessing's concern with gender roles that led Fishburn to argue that "[Lessing's] early work did help break new artistic ground by validating the idea that the experiences of individual women were just as representative of modern life as those of individual men" (Fishburn 1987: 15-16). In most of her novels, the perspectival focus belongs indeed to a woman, who is portrayed along the path to self-awareness and a deeper insight into a collective reality which exercises strong forms of conditioning, often exemplified by the cultural construction of femininity itself. Against this interpretative background, Mary Turner, the heroine of *The Grass Is Singing*, reveals herself as the progenitress of a whole gallery of women, representing each a single *tessera* in a polyhedric identity mosaic. Regarded in these interpretative terms, the psychological breakdown suffered by Mary, just like that of Martha, seems to fatally haunt Lessing's subsequent heroines, and to condemn them to a temporary

³ The literary label *Angry Young Men*, deriving from both the title of the autobiography of Leslie Paul (1905-1985), *Angry Young Man* (1951), and the almost contemporary play by John Osborne (1924-1994), *Look Back in Anger* (1956), designates a group of English male authors who published their works soon after World War Two. Among its most representative voices are John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe, John Braine and John Wain. Although they did not constitute a proper literary school, all their works were pervaded by a conscious (albeit sometimes unrealistic) protest against the then socio-political establishment. This took the form of a vigorous claim to social change – aimed to inclusion more than to a radical transformation – through the representation of a disillusioned working class and, on the stylistic level, through the recourse to highly realistic dialectal modes. For an analysis of the contradictions pervading their output, see Greene (1991, especially pp. 39-44).



loss of self-awareness. In turn, such a loss also proves one of the unavoidable stages in a personal process of resistance to traditional female identity stereotypes: a resistance that can be prompted either by a need for emotional authenticity within relations with the other sex or for a personal, as well as artistic, self-realization.

However, unlike Mary, who inevitably pursues a path to death in that she proves unable to listen to her own conscience and resist the white community's disapproval of her conduct (read: interethnic attraction), her literary "heiresses" lay claim to a greater inner clairvoyance, which favours their encounter with Otherness, an otherness represented by men, society or the woman it is thought they ought to be. It is important to underline that the journey leading these intense figures to the acquisition of a renewed self-awareness never eschews certain unconventionality of behaviour. Even Mary Turner, in her delirium, almost unconsciously breaks many of those taboos that in a colonial society are ultimately aimed at excluding the colonized from access to socio-economic resources, thus mortifying their individual conscience and favouring the white minority holding power.

2. *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK* AND THE INTERROGATION OF THE NOVELISTIC FORM

In the 1960s, Lessing's writing distances itself from traditional realistic features and recuperates the modernist experience of the 1920s, with its sensitivity to experimental forms of composition, without sharing, however, the modernist faith in the novel's capacity to provide a unitary reconfiguration of reality, if only in the characters' unconscious dimension.⁴

In this respect, *The Golden Notebook* (1962) proves to be, to cite Margaret Drabble, a real "watershed", "a transforming work" (Drabble 1972: 50, 54). In introducing innovative formulae of representation, which, in turn, contribute to revolutionizing the twentieth-century English novel, the work displays its author's necessity to interrogate the form of the novel and to uncover its mechanisms of composition. The text is centred on the personal and artistic crisis experienced by Anna Wulf, whose multiple "selves" are portrayed minutely. The major theme is thus the heroine's perception of the fragmentation of both life and her personal conscience, as illustrated in the following quotation:

⁴ This point is best illustrated by David Lodge (1977: 226) who, in comparing modernist and post-modernist modes of writing, argues that "the falsity of the patterns imposed upon experience in the traditional realistic novel is common ground between the modernists and the post-modernists, but to the latter it seems that modernists, too, for all their experimentation, oversimplified the world and held out a false hope of somehow making it at home in the human mind. [...] Postmodernism subverts that faith".



I suffer torments of dissatisfaction and incompleteness because of my inability to enter those areas of life my way of living, education, sex, politics, class bar me from. It is the malady of some of the best people of this time; some can stand the pressure of it; others crack under it; it is a new sensibility, a half-conscious attempt towards a new imaginative comprehension (Lessing 1973a: 80).

Such lack of psychological coherence finds its stylistic equivalent in the innovative discontinuity of a narrative fabric articulated in such a way that any of the heroine's identity dimensions is explored in a single diary. And it is only at the end of the novel that the process of writing the eponym Golden Notebook will allow Anna, hitherto suffering from writer's block, to recuperate the coherence of her psychological sphere, as well as her creative imagination.⁵

3. THE EXPLORATION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS IN THE SUFI PHASE

The Golden Notebook inaugurates Lessing's subsequent literary phase,⁶ inspired by psychological motifs and linked to the author's interest in Sufism. The surreal *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1975), all produced in this new phase, are ascribed to the so called 'inner space fiction', a literary label deriving from J. G. Ballard's 1962 manifesto of Inner Space and designating a peculiar kind of science fiction where the exploration of the unconscious substitutes the interplanetary dimension. What is important to underline is that the choice to opt for non-mimetic narrative formulae, far from indicating Lessing's renunciation to commitment, meets her exigency to deconstruct a realistic writing traditionally conveying patriarchal power-relations and gender-biased models.

The Golden Notebook, and in particular *Landlocked*, *The Four-Gated City* and *The Summer Before the Dark*, testify to the evolution of Lessing's narrative, whose motifs, while exploring the unconscious, come to lose particularistic standpoints so as to embrace social as well as existential issues of which women become, once again, the

⁵ Although *The Golden Notebook* was hailed as one of the inspirational texts of Women's Liberation Movement, indicating Lessing as one of the icons of the Movement would prove an illegitimate critical operation. As for the reception of the novel, Lessing herself affirms that: "This novel was not a trumpet for Women's Liberation. It described many female emotions of aggression, hostility, resentment. It put them into print. Apparently what many women were thinking, feeling, experiencing, came as a great surprise" (Lessing 1973: 9).

⁶ Although the present survey suggests that it is possible to identify some major phases in Lessing's entire production, it is important to underline that any rigid compartmentalisation of her works into rigid categories, would obscure the constant evolution of themes and forms underlying her work. On this point, moreover, in her letter to Francesca Bugliani dated 27.11.1981, Lessing herself wrote: "I see my work as a continuous development" (Bugliani 1982: p. 26).



privileged interpreters. In this respect, as Lessing put it in the 1971 Preface to the *The Golden Notebook*:

I understood that the way over [...] the unease at writing about “petty personal problems” was to recognize that nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one’s own. Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions – and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas – can’t be yours alone. The way to deal with the problems “of subjectivity”, that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual [...] is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does, transforming a private experience [...] into something larger (Lessing 1973b: 13-14).

4. BETWEEN THE SCIENCE FICTION AND REALISTIC PHASE: SHIFTING FORMS OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

In the subsequent science fiction series entitled *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979-1983) Lessing does not hesitate to launch attacks on institutions such as the Church, the State and the scientific establishment. This narrative reflects Lessing’s interest in Idries Shah, whose writing about the already mentioned Sufi mysticism foregrounds the possibility for the individual conscience to attain liberation through the recognition of the bond existing between the subject’s destiny and that of the whole society.⁷ Thus, the emphasis on forms of almost mystical knowledge does not prevent Lessing’s production of this period from acting as a vehicle for bitter social criticism.

Lessing’s subsequent literary phase – including *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), *The Good Terrorist* (1985), *The Fifth Child* (1988) and its sequel *Ben in the World* (2000) – marks her return to realistic formulae and presents thematic parallels with respect to her early novels, being pervaded by a specific attention to issues relating to the female universe, an interest for inner clairvoyance as the final stage of a personal process of identity formation and, finally, the relation between the individual and the social context, which is often marred by forms of oppression and discrimination.

Among her subsequent novels, *Love, Again* (1996), *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999) and *The Sweetest Dream* (2001), an autobiographical novel, deserve to be mentioned. If in *Love, Again* Lessing explores the question of women’s aging so introducing the controversial issue of the torments of love at old age,⁸ and in *Mara and Dann* she exalts the importance of memory and its transmission, in *The Sweetest Dream*, Communism, the dream alluded to in the title, being responsible for the

⁷ In relation to *Canopus in Argos* Lessing says: “I see inner space and outer space as reflections of each other. I don’t see them as in opposition” (Lessing qtd. in Hazelton 1982).

⁸ For a recent and thorough analysis of Lessing’s treatment of female physical decay and its effect on women’s self-perception and social life, see Lynne Segal’s latest work, *Out of Time. The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing* (2013), especially Chapter 3, “The Perils of Desire”.



political disappointment of a whole generation, becomes the object of a bitter criticism, together with the militants' hypocrisy and delay in denouncing the horrors perpetrated by the Soviet regime.

In 1994 and 1997 respectively, Lessing published *Under My Skin, Volume I of My Autobiography, to 1949*, the first volume of her autobiography centred on the three decades she spent in Africa, and *Walking in the Shade, Volume II of My Autobiography, 1949-1962*, which starts from her arrival in London. In both volumes the author's personal experiences are posited as in close connection with socio-political facts of which Lessing stigmatises the inherent contradictions within dense metanarrative reflections. That Lessing's metanarrative preoccupations, such as the actual functioning of the creative mechanism, are paramount is made explicit from the beginning of the second chapter of *Under My Skin* where she writes:

You cannot sit down to write about yourself without rhetorical questions of the most tedious kind demanding attention. Our old friend, the Truth, is first. The truth... how much of it to tell, how little? It seems it is agreed this is the first problem of the self-chronicler, and obloquy lies in wait either way (Lessing 1994: 11).

Moreover, at the end of the very same chapter she goes on saying, "I am trying to write this book honestly. But were I to write it aged eighty-five, how different would it be?" (Lessing 1994: 17).

In 2003 *The Grandmothers*, a collection of four short stories (one of which gives the title to the entire collection) marks Lessing's return to the genre of short fiction, to which both *Five* (1953) and *African Stories* (1964) also belong. In the collection, based on the thematic motif of truth (understood primarily as the acquisition of knowledge), Lessing suggests that, although its discovery often involves destabilizing consequences, the deriving pain is more preferable than self-deception.

Published in 2004, *Time Bites: Selected Essays* consists of a collection of some of the author's most celebrated essays never published before. In 2005, Lessing published the novel *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog*, the sequel to *Mara and Dann*. The plot revolves around the characters of Dann, who continues his quest for knowledge, Mara's daughter and the young Griot, who practices the art of story-telling. Once again, Africa is represented in non-stereotypical terms, as a place of rebirth for a civilization, the Western one, whose extreme technological development has proved to be the cause of its own frailty.

In 2007 Lessing published *The Cleft*, a novel in which an elderly Roman senator and historian, Transit, devotes himself to writing the story of the origins of humanity starting from the examination of fragments of parchment scrolls to which, millennia before, the Cleft had entrusted their history. A history that he, inevitably, submits to interpretation. The Cleft are depicted as a primordial community of women whose members give birth exclusively to female children until the day when their harmony is



suddenly interrupted by the birth of male child. If, on the one hand, the novel (which could be almost viewed as a narrative of the myth of origins) explores the ways in which the gendered polarization and radicalization of the qualifications associated with the poles of the Male/Female binary couple determine the embitterment of social relations up to the point of invalidating human progress itself, on the other hand, the attitude Transit assumes vis-à-vis the historical documents he examines allows Lessing to convey metanarrative observations about the porosity between fact and fiction, between History and personal stories, but above all about the selective and ideological nature of the 'official archive'.

The same year Lessing was awarded – according to many, belatedly – the Nobel Prize for Literature for her being an “epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny”,⁹ as can be read in the Swedish Academy’s official motivation.

Lessing’s last work dates back to 2009. *Alfred and Emily*, a fiction novel structured like a diptych, as well as faithfully tracing the lives of her parents, also presents a possible alternative to them within an imaginative projection which is not affected by the war. In the novel, Lessing deconstructs the myth of the Great War as celebrated by British official discourse and popular propaganda, and, in so doing, she explores the disruptive impact of History on the personal microhistories of single individuals, as she herself anticipates in the “Foreword” to the volume:

The war, the Great War, the war that would end all war, squatted over my childhood. The trenches were as present to me as anything I actually saw around me. And here I still am, trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free (Lessing 2009: viii).

The heterogeneity of the themes covered throughout Lessing’s production, together with her continued enthusiasm for experimenting with language and forms of representation, reveal the writer’s substantial independence with respect to rigid ideological positions. In this regard, in capturing the specific essence of Lessing’s work and, within this, the constant reconfiguration of the relation between the content and the formal solutions adopted, in 1987 Fishburn aptly observed:

Absolutely committed to her role of social critic, she continues to expose the underside of oppression and injustice. But what form this exposure will take from one novel to the next is anybody’s guess. As only great writers can be, Lessing is always full of surprises. That is one of her greatest charms – and of her greatest challenges (Fishburn 1987: 10).

⁹ On Lessing being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, see Gendusa (2008).



As this survey has aimed to foreground, Lessing's literary production, with its protean alternation of thematic motifs and strategies of narrative experimentation, cannot be explored but in relation to the complex dynamics characterizing English as well Western European official discourse and cultural heritage. That this relation is one of highly oppositional liminality was highlighted by Jeannette King in 1988:

Doris Lessing writes from the point of view of someone who is part of the tradition of Western European literature, and yet distanced from it, writing from its margins. This 'marginal' perspective is one of her greatest strengths as a writer, giving her a freedom to explore and analyse the 'centres' of our culture which she has fully and imaginatively exploited (King 1989: ix).

Endowed, to quote Elaine Showalter, with an "extraordinary barometric sensitivity to the social climate" (Showalter 1978: 307), which allowed her to register minutely – if not foresee – social change, Lessing made her literary intervention the political vehicle for a re-modelling and a re-definition of national (as well as Western) identity paradigms. From a perspective that posited itself at the "centre" of the British cultural system, Lessing nonetheless identified with those who inhabited (and still inhabit) its multifaceted peripheries (be they internal to the Nation or external to it), thus showing a constant interest for oppositional forms of signification.

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Ester Gendusa is a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Palermo. She holds a Ph.D. in English literature (University of Palermo) and a Master of Arts in "Gender, Culture and Politics" (University of London). The author of *Asimmetrie di genere e di razza in The Grass Is Singing di Doris Lessing* (Aracne 2011), she has written articles and book chapters on Arundhaty Roy, Erna Brodber, Margaret Atwood and Bernardine Evaristo. She has completed a monograph on Evaristo's narrative (*Identità nere e cultura europea*, Carocci, 2014) and edited the first collection of Evaristo's short stories (*Dove finisce il mondo*, Besa-Salento Books, forthcoming).

estergendusa@gmail.com