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TOWARDS AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE: A BEAUVOIRIAN READING OF DORIS LESSING'S NOVELS

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Acclaimed as the 'epicist of female experience', who, with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny, the Nobel Laureate Doris Lessing is a writer of epic scope and profound insight. Lessing's oeuvre unfolds three important dimensions – Lessing, the documenter of Rhodesian life; Lessing the feminist, explorer of the state of mid-century womanhood; and Lessing the seer, whose prophetic wisdom penetrates through history and culture to the essential given truth of the ages. Each dimension reveals a phase of her life, a facet of her personality, an aspect of her work, and a part of her artistic credo.

The present article attempts at an existentialist feminist reading of Lessing's novels by way of applying the concepts enshrined in the French feminist and philosopher Simon de Beauvoir's epochal work *The Second Sex*. The study endeavours to highlight a woman's quest for authentic existence by overcoming the three inauthentic attitudes namely – the Narcissist, the Woman in Love and the Mystic – and ultimately attaining authentic living. Over the course of her fictional works, Lessing draws extensively on women's inner, private experiences and her struggle to infuse clarity and coherence into her life. Her novels like *Martha Quest*, *The Golden Notebook*, *The Sweetest Dream*, et al are concerned with ways in which women find themselves at odds with the androcentric dispensation, experience self-loath and self-denial, wallow in inauthenticity and eventually discover their path to authentic existence.

Doris Lessing began her career in the 1950s writing realist fiction that focused on themes of racial injustice and colonialism. Actively involved in politics, she became a communist, and most of her works are concerned with the human social problems of the twentieth century; in particular, the position of women in society. As her writing developed, Lessing began to compose fiction that anticipated many feminist concerns of the late 1960s and 1970s. "Her strong willed, independent heroines often suffer emotional crisis in male dominated societies and must struggle with dominant socio-political constructs to reach higher levels of identity and liberation" (Sage 34).

The protagonists of Lessing's novels are invested with the gifts of acute perception of the world and its happenings, and the potential to better the prospects of mankind through creative endeavours. But this ascent of their progressive conscience is impeded by an existential crisis which leaves them floundering in disillusionment, deprivation and despair. This existential crisis stems from the conflict between transcendence and immanence. On the one hand the women endeavour to transcend the myth of 'the eternal feminine' in order to lead an independent life. But this will to transcend is hamstrung by the three inauthentic attitudes in which these women hide their authentic freedom: the Narcissist, the *amoureuse* or the Mystic. In all three of these attitudes, women deny the thrust of their original freedom by submerging it into the object. Consequently the make bad choices and quell their quest for transcendence and authentic living.

Lessing's debut novel, *The Grass is Singing* is a powerful study in moral disintegration – both of the oppressor and the oppressed. A lonely and desiccated Rhodesian white woman, Mary Mary eclipses her

authentic self by taking on the role of a narcissist and that of a hostess. She revels in pampering her blithe spirit and carefree self, with an air of self-adoration. Though she lives her life without the hassles of familial strife, she is still bound to the conventions of her society and is always the victim of social surveillance and reprobation.

Mary marries a white farmer working in Rhodesia, Dick Turner, after a perfunctory courtship. Brutalized and emotionally wilted due to an unhappy upbringing, Mary is wholly unsuited to the marriage and the hardships that go with working on a small farm in the veldt. "The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness . . . but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine" (Beauvoir 496).

Existential ethics holds that every subject plays the part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as mode of transcendence, he achieves liberty only through continual reaching out towards other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into 'en-soi' – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions – and of liberty into constraint and contingency. This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it, if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects. . . .The drama of women lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject – who always regards the self as the essential – and the compulsions of the situation in which she is the inessential. (Beauvoir 28-29)

Mary lacks the will to survive and the will to act. Her incapacity and unproductivity dooms her to an inauthentic life. The utter passivity and helplessness to transcend her chaotic and inconsequential existence exacerbates her own sense of inauthenticity and Mary ultimately meets with a wretched end. As Beauvoir says, Mary – a woman, does not enjoy the dignity of being a person:

Women become part of the 'patrimony' of man. She never enters into 'matrimony' with any man. Because she submits herself to the will of the man, subsumes her will, power, and her quest for transcendence. She thus, more often than not, willingly becomes the inessential 'Other'. . . .They did not enjoy that material independence which is one of the necessary conditions for inner liberty. (138)

Lessing's own passionate personal vision generates the power of her major work, a five-volume series called *Children of Violence*. *Martha Quest*, the first novel of the Series deals with the sexual and intellectual awakening of its eponymous protagonist after she leaves the claustrophobic farm setting. The second novel of the series *A Proper Marriage* explores a failing marriage, and by its end Martha has left her husband and daughter for increased left-wing political involvement. The third in the series, *A Ripple from the Storm*, exposes the failure of that political commitment to satisfy her social and personal needs, and *Landlocked*, which brings the series into the 1940s, seals Martha's estrangement from collective politics and from Africa. Post-war London is the setting for the final book the quintet, *The Four-Gated City*, in which the mature Martha has abandoned her political activism for introspection. The series ends with an apocalyptic vision for the future.

Lessing projects Martha's quest twenty-five years into the horrors of a bureaucratic future, with some hope for psychic communion between people, and even with beings of higher order, including spirits of the enlightened dead, but with civilization laid waste by leakage of nerve-gas and glazed over by spillage of atoms. (Baker 487)

Martha, the protagonist of the series embodies the quest for transcendence and authentic selfhood. Caught in the mire of repetition and beleaguered by the disintegration and disharmony of the world outside, Martha struggles to see order and harmony by upholding an authentic attitude to life. Martha's life is wrecked by an unhappy childhood, self-destructive early marriage, and communist party activity which gradually shore up to a search for herself and truthful engagement with the world. Martha is a child of violence. She was born in the wake of World War I, conceived in the womb of a distraught nurse and fathered by a shell-shocked, forever war-ridden vet. Her growing-up years was vitiated by the anxious, foreboding peace of the twenties and thirties, and World War II ushered Martha, along with the modern world, into maturity.

The novel focuses on Martha's life on the veld with her parents as well as in the larger context of the South African society. Martha is privileged to share in her author's intelligence, energy and ambition, and so privileged to betray herself absurdly and painfully. Her whirlwind romance with the civil servant Douglas Knowell is banal and self-deceptive. Even in the breathless interval before the marriage, Martha knows she is wrong. She is conscious of the anomaly that her marriage would end up to be with the cautious and conformist Knowell. Martha's bad choice leads her to self-deception which betrays her authentic self. Choice itself becomes suspect, unreal to her and she is meshed in contradiction and irrationality.

The Golden Notebook, Lessing's *tour de force*, stands out as a kind, of ultimate treatment of the subject of woman's conflict and the insanity they harbor if the woman has an independent and creative soul of her own and strives for integration amid chaos.

The central figure, Anna, a novelist suffering from a writer's block, compartmentalizes her life into four notebooks dealing with the areas of female experience. Characterized by a symbolic colour and narrated from different perspectives, each notebook incorporates aspects of Wulf's narratives that assume multiple levels of significance. The title of the novel refers to Anna's desperate attempts to integrate her fragmented and disparate experiences in order to achieve wholeness through art. (Sage 23)

Anna, the protagonist of the novel and her metafictional counterpart Ella are an embodiment of 'the woman in love', which makes them live in bad faith and stymie their transcendent will. According to Beauvoir, love confines woman in the feminine universe, leaves her mutilated, insufficient unto herself. For man, love and life are two different things, for a woman, it is her whole existence. Love signifies two different things for man and woman. For woman, it is devotion; it is an absolute submission of both body and soul. For woman love is a religion. It is unconditional faith. While men remain sovereign subjects even when they are in love, women forget and forgo their own personality when they love. Beauvoir avers that only in love can woman reconcile her eroticism and narcissism. The act of love requires of woman a profound self-abandonment. "She abandons herself to love first of all to save herself; but the paradox of idolatrous love is that in trying to save herself she denies herself utterly in the end" (660).

The protagonist of the novel Alice is an embodiment of one of the three inauthentic attitudes discussed by Beauvoir – the 'Mystic.' In Beauvoir's view, women tend to efface their authenticity by transmuting their passions and creative energy to seek union with a Supreme Being:

Love has been assigned to woman as her supreme vocation, and when she directs it towards a man, she is seeking God in him; but if human love is denied her by circumstances, she may choose to adore divinity in the person of God himself. Human love and divine love commingle. . . .In both cases, it is a matter of the salvation of the loving woman's contingent existence through her union with the Whole embodied in a supreme person. (679-680).

The Mystic's absolute submission to the Supreme Being can be compared to people's fervent commitment to the cause of Communism in England and elsewhere after the First World War. The women in Lessing's novels exemplify this Mystic attitude in their espousal of the Communist ideology. Beauvoir holds that though their object of pursuit seems intangible and impenetrable,

Most woman mystics are not content with abandoning themselves passively to God: they apply themselves actively to self-annihilation by the destruction of their flesh. . . . A woman's attitude towards her body – through humiliation and suffering she transforms it into a glory. From blood to glory through love: that is the emblem which sums up the great feminine dream. (684)

This self-immolating attitude of the Mystic is exemplified in the women characters in Lessing's novels. Driven by reformist zeal and revolutionary fervor, these women characters share Lessing's own sense of involvement and commitment to Communism. Alice, the 'good terrorist' of the novel embodies this Mystic attitude in her revolutionary activities. She is a quick intense woman whose politics advances towards more extreme actions. Alice fights against all forms of authority – from her disdain for her bourgeois parents to reviling the Establishment – thinking that it behoves her to create a better world through bloodshed and violence. But Alice never has a grasp of reality. She fails to cater to the demands of her individual self. She feels isolated and is deprived of the will to transcend her passive existence.

Retreat to Innocence explores the problem of the feminine identity in post-War England, in the context of psychological, political and sexual forces. The novel details the life of Julia Barr, the daughter of wealthy liberal parents, both of whom take active part in British politics. Having borne the brunt of the ravages of the world war, Julia seeks refuge in the world of high romance. She plunges headlong into a relationship with Jan Brod, a hard core communist and a writer from Czechoslovakia, who is passionate about his work on a manuscript detailing World War II from a radial perspective. Julia effaces herself in order to be part of Jan's life and his work. She fails to realize her authentic selfhood and is mired in the inauthentic attitude of 'the woman in love', who eclipses her individual self and who has all her happiness and hope in another man's keeping.

The novel *The Fifth Child* with its sequel *Ben in the World* is a dystopian novel which highlights the plight of Harriet – women as mothers, caught in the throes of conflict and suffering. So is the case with Frances Lennox, the heroine of the novel *The Sweetest Dream*. These women are caught in the doldrums of a repetitive and uncreative existence. They lead a silhouetted existence, shadowed in their obscured self and are oblivious to the demands of their selfhood.

Over the course of Lessing's novels, the central characters - women in late midlife - confront the dark underside of the erotic yearnings that enmesh them: the realities of longing and loss and the terrible knowledge of the impossibility of satisfaction. While the reawakening of desire catalyzes for each woman a serious reflection on her past and obliges her to consider the relationships among aging, gender, desire, and loss, Lessing's narrative traces a darker and more convoluted path. These women are torn between the conflicting demands of erotica and transcendence; they are swathed in delusions and lead an inauthentic living. This plight is exemplified in Kate Brown, the protagonist of the novel *The Summer Before the Dark* and Sarah Durham, the protagonist of *Love, Again*. Through these women characters, Lessing laments the emotional sterility, the desert of deprivation that looms as unattached women advance in age. "Over time, the roles one plays, the masks one assumes, drive the authentic self into ever deeper and more hidden regions, until the task of recovering that self becomes so urgent that it ultimately displaces all others" (Rubenstein 7).

The novel *The Summer before the Dark* also examines the conflicting role of man and woman in marital relationship. Man's freewill and noncommittal nature towards familial responsibilities – unencumbered by household grind, free to transcend trappings of domestic concerns – is at loggerheads with women's nature as the scrupulous and self-anointed preserver of domestic order, expending all their energy and enthusiasm to provide for the family. Their immersion in running the domestic affairs – the keeper of the hearth – keeps them unattended to the demands of their authentic self. They become the 'Angel of the House' at the cost of their quest for transcendent will and authentic selfhood. "Her role was only nourishing, never creative She remained doomed to immanence, incarnating only the static aspect of society, closed in upon itself" (Beauvoir 105). Women bear the brunt of domestic thralldom and never get to transcend the rigmarole of running the family. Their desire to exercise their freedom and invest their knowledge and skill for gaining personal transcendence and for the greater common good never materializes and they are caught in the quagmire of domestic drudgery.

Lessing's novels thus lay bare the plight of women who are unable to come to terms with their essential self. These bewildered women in her novels fail to perceive their subjective self and are cordoned off from the rest of the world as well. The concept of a unified self eludes them and they endlessly wallow in a searing sense of self-division. This sense of lack and incompleteness evinced in the women characters in Lessing's novels is what Dale Spender refers to as "devaluation of women, women's world, women's lives" (165) which is a manifestation of their inauthentic selfhood.

From this phase of inauthentic existence begins the arduous journey of these women towards authentic existence. The novels of Lessing discuss the need for women to transcend the individual, personal and private selves in order to attain a broader and wider consciousness. A recurrent theme of Lessing's work is that of an individual's relation with or severance from society, which largely contributes to the growth, maturity and emotional development of an individual in order to attain authentic selfhood. The novels of Lessing drive home the need to move from individual consciousness to collective consciousness through positive action, which helps the women characters to redeem their discordant and dissipated selves and attain psychic harmony. In this way they salvage their lost selves through love of self and love for other.

In "Towards Liberation: The Independent Woman," Beauvoir writes that when a woman is productive, active, when she makes trial of and senses her responsibility, when she is proud of her self-sufficiency she regains her transcendence. Women, Beauvoir says, are in the process of achieving economic and social autonomy. But they are not tranquilly installed in their new realm. They are striving to find their feet in the untrodden path they have taken. The independent woman of today is torn between her professional interests and the problems of her sexual life, it is difficult for her to strike a balance between the two.

When a woman treads cautiously – when she is not torn between the desire for self-assertion and self-effacement – not resorting to either submerge in her femininity or renounce her femininity, she is able to assert herself and also find fulfilment. A woman should neither exalt herself nor neglect herself – she should transcend herself through resourceful and significant venture for the progression of her own self and of humanity. (723)

In *Children of Violence*, Lessing demonstrates a strong endorsement of the heroine Martha's intense social commitment, who is anxious to change society, to work actively for a more humane and just world. Anna Wulf, the protagonist of *The Golden Notebook* finds fulfilment through transcendence, positive action and through their act of writing. Kate Brown in the novel *The Summer Before the Dark* and Sarah Durham of the novel *Love, Again* come to actualize their existence by exorcizing the phantom of the 'Angel of the house' – shedding their inauthentic attitudes and by discarding the stereotypical roles that they had been playing all along. Alice sheds the role of an 'all-purpose female drudge cooking and nannying for other people' (*The Good Terrorist* 33) and seeks to live an independent life and play the role of a real comrade to plunge into the revolution and bring about positive changes in the society. Thus these women perceive themselves as a source of strength, validate their existence and thereby forge an authentic self.

In her quest for authentic womanhood, the woman in the novels of Lessing thus gains a sense of self, she asserts her status as an autonomous individual. She makes trial of and senses her responsibility, takes responsibility for her action – puts her liberty to test. From obscured existence, she progresses to active existence, from woman of encumbrance, she transforms into woman of substance. Her concrete affirmation of self – catering to the demands of her authentic existence by actualizing herself while at the same time valuing, nurturing and validating her female essence does a woman come to attain authentic selfhood.

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