

## Seeing Herself through Literature: Martha Quest's Reading Habit in Doris Lessing's *The Children of Violence*

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**Abstract:** Most of Doris Lessing's female protagonists are widely read and they frequently think in literary, especially fiction, terms. Martha Quest, the protagonist of Lessing's *The Children of Violence Series*, is no exception, for as we shall see, she too demonstrates this capacity for image-making in literary sensitivity. She does so by developing a self contained, fictional world that shaped her life. Her romantic teen-age thinking, sexual life, maturity, marriage, and divorce – every phase of her life is flourished in the domain of fiction. This article is an attempt to illustrate how Martha Quest's life journey from an inexperienced teen-age period to maturity is merged into her fictional world.

Doris Lessing's five-volume series, *The Children of Violence* (*Martha Quest*, *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, *Landlocked* and *The Four-Gated City*) shows Martha Quest as developing from one volume to another in this series from a self confident though inexperienced teenage girl to a self-assured and relatively "free" woman. Her reading habit helps her in the journey towards maturity. Books, pamphlets and newspapers have become an integral part of Martha's personal education. Besides sharpening her personal and political sensitivity, she sometimes finds that reading has therapeutic values. She takes the help of reading books whenever she faces any problem. Sometimes her curiosity ends in finding that women in novels do not seem to have same problems like those she has.

Doris Lessing wrote *The Children of Violence* over a long period of time: *Martha Quest* the first novel of the series was published in 1952 and the final one, *The Four-Gated City* in 1969. The novels of the series have many resemblances to Lessing's life. Lessing was born in Persia in 1919 to British parents who later moved to Rhodesia where her family supported themselves by farming. Lessing like Martha in this *Series* grew up in the countryside and later earned her living through various jobs in an African town until she moved to England in 1949 where her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), was published. Widely regarded as one of the major writers of the mid-20th century and an influential figure among feminists, Lessing writes on a wide variety of themes including Rhodesia, women, communism, and global catastrophe. Distinguished for its energy and intelligence, her work is principally concerned with the lives of women-their psychology, sexuality, politics, work, relationship to men and to their children, and

their change of vision as they grow old. Lessing has lived ninety-three extraordinary years and has creatively chronicled women's lives for well over the last fifty years. Lessing was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature.

In *The Children of Violence* we find the protagonist Martha as having a fondness for reading. She uses reading as a source of illustrations to apply to her life. She is said to see herself through literature. From the start we see that reading, predominantly romantic reading is an essential part of Martha's life. Aside from the book on sex by Havelock Ellis that she was reading, she also indicates a wide familiarity with other, more literary, kinds of reading. Significantly, her dependence on reading is a result of her mother's (Mrs. Quest's) unvarying criticism and belittling of Martha. In turning away from her mother, Martha turns toward the Quest's bookcases. We subsequently learn that Martha's mind has been formed by "poetic literature" (*Martha Quest* 62), and that "what she believed had been built for her by the books she read, and those books had been written by citizens of that other country," i.e., a "self-contained world which had nothing to do with what lay around her" (*Martha Quest* 87-88). Mrs. Quest typically confuses Martha's adolescent languor and erratic behavior with the books the girl has been reading - Shelley and Byron and Tennyson and William Morris - but thinks of them as "too respectable" to have damaging qualities for Martha (*Martha Quest* 89-90). The "moral exhaustion" Martha feels when she see Southern Rhodesian justice for the natives is dreadful, she believes, not because it exists but because it exists in her own day even though the same degradation had been described by Dickens, Tolstoy, Hugo, Dostoevsky, and a dozen other writers she had read (*Martha Quest* 176).

Books become an integral part of her life. We find that she evaluates a letter from her mother in terms of the letters found in Victorian novels (*Martha Quest* 223). She gets her schooling about what war truly is through *ALL Quiet on the Western Front*, given to her by her father (*A Proper Marriage* 328-29). Everything she judges is anchored in her reading. She evaluates an older woman's house from the pictures of England one sees in novels, especially Edwardian novels (*A Proper Marriage* 332-33); she sees her town as being like a Victorian novel (*A Proper Marriage* 447); and she sees herself leaving her husband, Douglas as Nora would have, from Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (*A Proper Marriage* 534). She even sees her sexual capacities as a novelist might have seen them (*A Proper Marriage* 539-40). Sometimes she compares herself to Madame Bovary (*Landlocked* 330-31) and sees herself leaving her child as understood by writers of Victorian melodrama (*Landlocked* 498).

However, reading for Martha serves as far more than merely a source of illustrations to apply to her life, or as escapist entertainment. She also finds that such excursions into books serve a vitally important purpose.

Then she returned to resume that other journey of discovery which alternated with the discoveries of a young woman loose in town: she returned to her books. She was reading her way slowly and vaguely from book to book, on no better system than that one author might mention another, or that a name appeared in a publisher's spring list.....She read as if this were a process discovered by herself; as if there had never been a guide to it.....She picked up each new book, using the author's name as a sanction, as if the book were something separated

and self-contained, a world in itself. And as she read she asked herself, What has this got to do with me? Mostly, she rejected; what she accepted she took instinctively, for it rang true with some tuning fork or guide within her; and the measure was that experience (she thought of it as one, though it was the fusion of many, varying in intensity) which was the gift of her solitary childhood on the veld: that knowledge of something painful and ecstatic, something central and fixed, but flowing. It was a sense of movement, of separate things interacting and finally becoming one, but greater-it was this which was her lodestone, even her conscience; and so, when she put down this book, that author, it was with the simplicity of perfect certainty, like the certainties of ignorance: It isn't true. And so these authors, these philosophers who had fed and maintained (or so she understood) so many earlier generations, were discarded with the ease with which she had shed religion: they wouldn't do, or not for her. In the meantime, she continued with the process of taking a fragment here and a sentence there, and built them into her mind, which was now the most extraordinary structure of disconnected bits of poetry, prose, fact and fancy; so that when she claimed casually that she had read Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche, what she really meant was that she had deepened her conviction of creative fatality. She had in fact not read either of them, or any other author, if reading means to take from an author what he intends to convey. (*Martha Quest* 209-11)

When Martha stumbles upon any situation for which she has no ready answers or solutions, she finds reading valuable therapeutically, as when her marriage to Douglas shows signs of breaking apart (*A Proper Marriage* 321-22). In her own words, she slowly "tested various shells for living in, offered to her in books" (*A Proper Marriage* 325), even though she eventually realizes women in novels do not seem to have quite the same problems as those she has (*A Proper Marriage* 465). Gradually Martha does turn to exclusively political and social reading, greatly because of the burning desire within her for a more satisfying commitment.

It is in the dominion of the political where Martha's reading changes most radically from her juvenile interests, though not to the degree to which it does for others in her Communist organization. Martha feels at this time as she had years earlier when the Cohen's had given her books to read (*A Ripple from the Storm* 64), i.e., as if she "had been given a gauge of trust." Martha's ensuing reading in the realm of the political persists with material about Japanese atrocities and African education (*Landlocked* 313) and the many pieces of literature sent by the organization from Russia. Shortly before she leaves Africa, Martha and her compatriots read and refer reverentially to "the book," an otherwise unnamed book by Timofy Gangin, a Russian peasant who became a minor governmental official following the 1917 revolution, and who, after being imprisoned for some years, went to the United States and wrote books denounced the Soviet Union. The book itself is instantaneously denounced - without being read- by some members of the organization, but Martha dutifully reads the entire books, passing it on to Anton, who reads it.

Martha read it. If this was true, then everything she had been saying for the last seven years was a lie. But perhaps it was exaggerated? - after all, a man imprisoned unjustly was bound to be bitter and to exaggerate? That word

exaggerates...it rang false, it belonged to a different scale of truth. Reading this book, these books, it was her first experience, though a clumsy, unsure one, of using a capacity she had not known existed. She thought: I *felt* something is true, as if I'm not even reading the words of the book, but responding else. She thought, vaguely, If this book were not on this subject, but about something else, well, the yardsticks I would use would say: Yes, this is true. One has an instinct one trusts, yes....

Martha gave the book to Anton. At first he said, "I'm not going to read this trash." But he read it, dropping, as he did so, sarcastic remarks about the author's character – an unpleasant one, he said. Then he became silent. Well, nothing new about that. Martha waited, while the book lay on the table, apparently discarded. Then Anton said, "After all, they aren't saints, they were bound to make mistake." And off he went to the Foresters, just as if he were not aware of the enormity of this remark. He did not mention the book again- and was not talking at all about Germany. (*Landlocked* 486)

The extensive discussion among the party members about the implications of the book (*Landlocked* 492-94) demonstrates not only the explosive quality of its contents, but also the divisive and fragmented quality of the group itself: some members say the book should not have been read, others say it should have as much attention as any other document, but Martha, curiously silent during the exchange, takes what appears to be a neutral stand symptomatic of her gradual disillusionment with communism.

On one of her last days in Rhodesia, Martha and Mrs. Van, now alienated over the particular form of leftist political philosophy which is to prevail, debate the value and possible truthfulness of such books. For Martha, revelations about the inconsistencies of the Soviet Union are overwhelmingly new, whereas for Mrs. Van a democratic Socialist, the evils of communism have never been a secret. Martha is unable to accept the fact that Mrs. Van is correct, partly, of course, because of the generation gap, but also because Martha, reacting against the Communist party, begins to go in the opposite direction, away from socialism as much as communism (*Landlocked* 531).

Martha's final task prior to leaving England is again related to her reading in political philosophy. An old revolutionary, Johnny Lindsay, has died and has requested that his memoirs be prepared for publication (*Landlocked* 531-33): publication is also scheduled for the utterly chaotic memoirs of Thomas Stern, her last lover in Africa, who has died of fever while working and living with natives in an isolated place. The extensive description of the Stern memoirs (*Landlocked* 533-37) suggests that they were written during a state of delirium, for they contain poetry, sayings, jokes, stories, histories of African tribes, statistics, biographies and obituaries of native chieftains, obscenities, recipes, charms, tales, anecdotes, and nonsense-writing, in various colors of ink and in Polish, Yiddish, and English. The chaotic condition of these memoirs clearly makes them unfit for editing or publication, a fact that leaves Martha with a profound sense of the unreality and lunacy of the kind of commitment she had while working for leftist causes. Curiously, these personal accounts of Johnny and Thomas contrast with the native unreality of the highly romantic diary account Martha is described as having written when the series begins

(*Martha Quest* 16), almost as if to say to Martha that little of importance has occurred in the fourteen years separating the documents: *plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose*. In brief, though Martha's awareness of life has not altered in degree since her youth, her sense of perspective has, thus making her desire for love and happiness more akin to the "wishful thinking" of adolescence than she admits to herself.

Mrs. Van herself had gone through somewhat the same metamorphosis in relation to reading as has Martha. As a young girl of eighteen, she had read Olive Schreiner's *The Story of a South African Farm* (1833) and like her rationalist-feminist forerunner, Mrs. Van began a personal inquiry into intellectual matters (*A Ripple from the Storm* 202-3). She afterward read Robert Ingersoll, famed agnostic (*A Ripple from the Storm* 203-4), and books and newspapers from both Britain and the United States. The difference between her and Martha, though, is not the reading diet itself so much as the manner with which the ideas are assimilated. For Mrs. Van always put the personal- her husband and children- first, and then retreated into periods of study, which by agreement were never interrupted by her husband. Thus she gives the appearance of being a conventionally well-to-do matron, publicly known to be a "kaffir-lover," a socialist, and a libertarian in the sense in which a democratic socialist works through democratic procedures to effect government changes (*A Ripple from the Storm* 203-6).

Related to the extensive treatment of books and pamphlets is the matter of journalism, for the frequent references to newspapers of various kinds is an essential part of Martha's personal education. Even as a teenager Martha realizes that the dominant local newspaper, the *Zambesia News*, is a "disgrace" for not printing the truth about political conditions in Europe (*Martha Quest* 220). The News is repeatedly described as less than accurate in its reporting of racial and political news, and is frequently caught in unacknowledged contradictions. Mrs. Van regularly collects clippings from the News, filed under "White Settler Imbecilities," which she sends to newspapers and magazines in other countries: as evidence of the deplorable state of affairs in Zambesia" (*A Ripple from the Storm* 216-17). Since the News has no effective competition, Martha and her associates have to resort to papers from England, notably the *Observer* and the *New Statesman and Nation*; Martha's noticing Douglas reading the *New statesman* (*Martha Quest* 128-30) draws them together, just as earlier her being introduced to that newspaper made her aware of socialism (*Martha Quest* 128-30).

When her marriage breaks up, Martha considers such questions as "What did the state of self-displaying hysteria Douglas was in have in common with the shrill, maudlin self-pity of a leader in the *Zambesia News* when it was complaining that the outside world did not understand the sacrifices the white population made in developing the blacks?" (*A Proper Marriage* 466) For, Martha holds there is a connection; that is, Martha now knows for certain, if she were ever in any doubt of it, that the idealistic and romantic statements found in books and newspapers have little if any connection with what life really had to offer. Douglas is thus a part of the schoolgirl's (bookish) romantic idealization of marriage, as the News's maintenance of the myths of white supremacy and political expediency is the façade of an essentially immature and escapist and inhuman approach to man's relationships with his fellowman.

Doris Lessing's protagonists are widely read and they frequently think in literary expressions. Martha Quest is also doing so in the five-volume *The Children of Violence Series*.

Reading becomes a fundamental part of her personal education. It is through reading that Martha sharpens both her personal and political sensitivity. What is more, Martha's perception about life is so intimately connected with books that she intends to evaluate every detail of her life in the light of her reading experience.

**Works Cited:**

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