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The Labyrinthine Quest for Identity in Doris Lessing's *Children of Violence*

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Abstract:

If the *bildungsroman* has traditionally been considered as an androcentric¹ literary genre—a linear narrative that describes the progress of a male hero from childhood to adulthood, it loses this original meaning in Doris Lessing's series of *Children of Violence*, published between 1952 and 1969. The progress of the female protagonist Martha Quest is a parody of a linear teleological narrative whose goal is the achievement of a unified and authentic self. Doris Lessing aligns the quest narrative with the paradigm of identity to show that the journey of self-discovery is labyrinthine, fragmented and discontinuous rather than linear. In the first volume of *Children of Violence*, Martha Quest bears a humanist notion of subjectivity that relies on the ideal of singular, fixed and whole selfhood. Yet, throughout her development from childhood to adulthood and struggle with institutional and social forces, Martha Quest realizes that this process is rather labyrinthine in its complexity and bifurcations. It breaks her search for unity and produces differences and multiplicities. The quest for self in Lessing's *Children of Violence* creates what Gilles Deleuze would call “lines of escape” or “*lignes de fuite*”, disseminating the self and producing new becomings.

The dissemination of the self-suggestive of the discontinuity of the quest and its labyrinthine nature- finds its eco in the narrative process itself. The novelist weaves a parodic female *bildungsroman*, through which the study of imageries of entrapment or enclosure, of metaphors of growth and evolution, and of structures of doubling and repetition reveals that Martha's quest is constantly derailed, deferred and even degenerated by what the heroine perceives as “the nightmare repetition” (*APM*, 77), which is in a way the drag of history. Her journey, in which the most intimate dilemmas—the most global and impersonal and the most internal and external are intertwined—becomes more like a labyrinth as if any degree of transgression or transcendence were fragile and impossible. The protagonist's nomadic mobility from the African veld of Southern Rhodesia with its sickening atmosphere and its imperial and patriarchal façade to an imagined lost Eden in England, in search for genuine identity and English roots, traces out metaphoric Deleuzian ‘lines of flight’ and maps out a ‘deterritorialized’ cartography of the self to suggest that the quest is always a process in the way rather than an end. The pattern of self-development is metaphorically labyrinth-like in its circularity, and irregularity of its flow paths that lead to the center of the self. Symbolically and in relation to the concept of identity, the idea of the labyrinth crystallizes through an

¹ The ‘*bildungsroman*’, translated in French by “roman d’initiation,” “roman de formation” or “roman d’apprentissage”, is an 18th century German genre with the archetypal Wilhelm Meister by Goethe. It describes “the process of development and education of a single protagonist from childhood through adolescence, leaving him at the threshold of maturity.” Esther Kleinbord-labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine. The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*, second edition, New York: Peter Lang, 1988.

“By and large, the *bildungsroman* has been a male form because women tended to be viewed traditionally as static rather than dynamic, as instances of a femaleness considered essential rather existential.” Ellen Morgan, “Human becoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel,” *Images of women in Fiction, Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon, Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972.

esoteric experience, which is evocative of the Sufi way that influenced Doris Lessing to suggest that Martha finally learns that the way out is to retrace the way in.

Thus, the present paper aims at studying the imageries of entrapment, repetition, growth and circularity in the quintology of *The Children of Violence* to analyze the metaphor of the labyrinth, associated with the pattern of the journey and the concept of self. The question raised by the novels is whether this questing soul's thirst for "home" and oneness and authenticity of self will be quenched by reaching the shores of England in the last volume of *The Four-Gated City* (1969) or will it be drowned by a tumultuous anonymity and further dissemination in the collective realm of human experience.

The repetitive quality that characterizes the narrative of self-development and growth is a reminder of the labyrinth in its meshes and bifurcations. It is incarnated by the circular plot, which finds its best representation in the imagery of the tree in volume four of *Children of Violence*, entitled *Landlocked* (1965). The tree is described as a "teak showing the how many years of its growth in irregular **concentric** lines" (11). The adjective "concentric" evokes the imagery of the labyrinth to suggest the multiple concentric pathways circling its center. These concentric lines span the labyrinthine journey of Martha Quest. Rather than drawing upon linear narratives of progress, the heroine is trapped within these circles at each stage of her life: In book I of the series, entitled *Martha Quest* (1952), Martha appears to the reader as an unyielding and displaced adolescent, locked in her solipsistic, concentric and circular world of literature and day-dreams of "a noble city" in England, "set foursquare and colonnaded along its flower-bordered terraces" (*MQ*, 17), as a strategy of rejection of parental authority, social normativity, prejudice and racism in Southern Rhodesia.

The questing plot sets in motion a trajectory of desire undertaken by the female protagonist Martha Quest to find a life that will allow her to be "herself" free from the stifling atmosphere of conventionality and the "nightmare repetition" that characterizes the "white settler mentality" in colonial central Africa. Yet, the sense of an ending² is already felt by the reader right from the epigraph that initiates the first book of the series: "I am so tired of it, and also tired of the future before it comes" (*MQ*, 7). This opening sentence to the story stands as an anticipatory statement that dooms the quest to its end, triggered by a speaking subject who renounces the journey before it begins. This circularity not only translates the determinism that marks the narrative but it also hints at the boredom of the questing protagonist, who, from the outset, is burdened by the drag of fatalism. She finds herself wondering "if all has been said, why do I have to go through it?" (*MQ*, 8). Martha Quest comes to recognize that she is enclosed by a containing labyrinthine structure in which she is stifled and out of which she strives to break.

The heroine's quest for identity starts by an attempt at grasping her self-image. The motif of the mirror suggests a doubling that affects the psychological and ontological state of the main character, and initiates the process of 'othering'— another important characteristic of the labyrinth's unpredictable pathways. Otherness here refers to the internal otherness aroused by the feelings of estrangement and displacement in Southern Rhodesia. In the novels of the *Children of Violence* series, mirrors infinitely **refract** rather than reflect. At each stage of her life, Martha Quest returns back to the mirror to look for self-reflection, but she only finds a refracted self "Standing alone in a room with a full-length mirror before," Martha saw a "vision of someone **not herself**, or rather herself transfigured to the measure of a burningly insistent future [...]. She did not know herself" (*MQ*, 89). The mirror scenes come to reinforce the sense of enclosure overwhelming the questing protagonist, who finds herself as an alienated subject in a circular chase, trying to sneak upon its tail from behind. This process

² I have been inspired by Frank Kermode book's title *The Sense of an Ending*.

of estrangement evokes Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage³, according to which the infant who has not yet achieved full development, imagines its own image figuratively reflected in the 'mirror' or in the 'other's look', as a 'whole person'. The formation of the self in the Other's look is, according to Lacan, crucial before entering the 'Symbolic Order'⁴, including language, culture and sexual difference:

Martha had gained a clear picture of herself from the outside. She was adolescent, and therefore bound to be unhappy: British, and therefore uneasy and defensive; in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and therefore inescapably beset with problems of race and class; female and obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past. She was tormented with guilt and responsibility and self-consciousness. (*MQ*, 18)

In the Sports Club, Martha's claim for subjectivity in the gaze of the 'Other' crystallizes through her encounter with a musician boy during a dance scene:

Martha watched his eyes; she was obsessed by the need to look at the eyes of these people, and not their bodies; for they were serious, anxious, even pleading; while all the time their bodies, their faces, contorted into the poses required of them. It was as if their surfaces, their limbs, their voices, were possessed, it was an exterior possession that did not touch them, left them free to judge and comment...Towards the end of the dance, encouraged by the intelligent seriousness of the blue eyes, [...] she wanted to establish contact with him, simply and warmly; she wanted him to recognize her as a reasonable being. (*MQ*, 155-156)

Martha can only see herself through the others' eyes at this stage. Therefore, she strives to flee a model of femininity and motherhood, dictated by her patriarchal family and social circle. Within the Lacanian perspective, Martha's relationship to her mother is a significant issue that translates the protagonist's traumatizing experience of self-development. In another mirror scene in book four of *Children of Violence, Landlocked*, when Martha "stood in front of a mirror and lifted her brown arms to her hair, looking with a smile at her smooth perfect flesh [...]", she was astonished by "a grimness in that [smile] that reminded her of the set of her mother's face when she sat sewing [...]" (19). Martha's mother in *Children of Violence* is associated with the androgynous witch figure as symbolized by the mythical Hypnos and Thanatos⁵. They are the archetypal incarnation of eternity, as it has been revealed in one of Martha's nightmares seeing Mrs. Quest as "the eternal mother, holding sleep and death in her twin hands like a sweet and poisonous cloud of forgetfulness" (*MQ*, 32). In another instance of the book, the novelist comments "sleep, sleep, the house was saturated by it; and Mrs. Quest's voice murmured like the spells of a witch, 'You must be tired darling, [...]" (*MQ*, 31).

In order to escape the contaminating "spell" of her parents, the heroine moves from country to town where she gets trapped in the repetitive course of the Sports Club life. The excess of movement, there, which contrasts with the status quo of the farmhouse life, turns

³ According to Lacan, in this stage, the child starts to feel itself separate from its mother. The child recognizes itself in its reflected image. In his fourth Seminar, "La relation d'objet," Paris: Seuil, 1994. Lacan writes "the mirror stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body-image." The child needs the recognition of the other to arrive at what might experience as identity.

⁴ In his Seminar IV, "La relation d'objet," Paris: Seuil, 1994. Lacan suggests that the symbolic order refers to the order of language associated with the father, or the domain of culture and societal norms as opposed to the imaginary order, which is the domain of nature and unity with the mother.

⁵ Hypnos and Thanatos are the Greek mythological twin Gods of Sleep and Death. Hypnos, Latin Somnus, Greco-Roman god of sleep. Hypnos was the son of Nyx (Night) and the twin brother of Thanatos (Death). In Greek myth, he is variously described as living in the underworld or on the island of Lemnos (according to Homer) or (according to Book XI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) in a dark, musty cave in the land of the Cimmerians, through which flowed the waters of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness and oblivion.
<http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/279818/Hypnos>

out to be a dizzying, concentric and labyrinthine rotation that paralyses both her mind and body, and suppresses the very consciousness of temporality:

Night after night, they were up till the sun rose, they went to work as usual, and they met again by five in the evening. For into this timeless place, where everything continued dream-like year after year, had come, like a frightened wind, a feeling of necessity, an outside pressure. (*MQ*, 230)

Martha's next attempt to break through this labyrinthine pattern is equally disappointing. Her hasty decision to marry Douglas Knowell, in book II of the series, *A Proper Marriage*, comes both as a flight from and a dire consequence of this vicious circularity. She is sucked into the conventional cycle of matrimony:

She could take no step, perform no action, no matter how apparently new and unforeseen, without the secret fear that in fact this new and arbitrary thing would turn out to be part of the inevitable process she was doomed to. She was, in short, in the grip of the great bourgeois monster, the nightmare *repetition*. (*APM*, 104)

As a young matron, Martha feels the servitude of femininity to the process of procreation. Her frequent cycles of anxiety about the idea of motherhood are caused by her further entrapment in the reproductive cycle of merely instinctual nature. She vainly attempts to transcend the consciousness of the fetus in her womb. The fetus would breed the multiplicity and disintegration she fears most. As it gradually takes hold of her, she sinks in the timelessness of an inward life movement. For her, "having a baby was a nuisance, a painful duty". (*APM*, 331) or the beginning of the inexorable pattern of feminine repetition, projected through the metaphor of the ant-emblematic of the disintegration of identity: "It was the house of the kopje, collapsed into a mess of ant-tunneled mud, ant-consumed grass, where red-ants made tunnels, wove a net, like red veins, over the burial mound of Martha's soul" (*Landlocked*, 21).

The ants, weaving a net, like a labyrinth around Martha's soul symbolize the different and multiple selves that the heroine rejects, and yet, they make up her identity, keeping it fluctuating in a tangled web of contradictions.

In her study of adolescent psychosexual evolution, Simone de Beauvoir describes the transition from girlhood to womanhood as an 'othering' process, during which "feminine solipsism is pulverized, while a chronic marginality is demarcated."⁶ Martha will, henceforth, be the site of the relentless conflict between her autonomous self that seeks freedom and the other feminine self trapped in marriage and maternity.

She thought confusedly that there was always a point when men seemed to press a button, as it were, and one was expected to turn into something else for their amusement. This 'turning into something else' had landed her where she was now: married, signed and sealed away from what she was convinced she was. (*PM*, 17)

The marital circle relegates Martha to the marginality of otherness, by confining her to commonplace existence, dictated by patriarchy. The circular pattern of the quintology is best represented by the Ferris wheel, spinning outside of Martha's apartment, which she had as a young married woman in volume II of *Children of Violence*, *A Proper Marriage*. The wheel, turning slowly and forming at each passage a luminous picture of a reiterated and perpetual movement becomes her obsessive symbol of the cycle of nature encoded in the female body

⁶ De Beauvoir analyses this Othering process : « Jusqu' alors elle était un individu autonome : il lui faut renoncer à sa souveraineté -- un conflit éclate entre sa revendication originelle qui est d'être sujet, activité, liberté, et d'autre part ses tendances érotiques et les sollicitations sociales qui l'invitent à s'assumer comme objet passif. Elle se saisit spontanément comme l'essentiel: comment se résoudre-t-elle à devenir l'inessentiel ? Mais si je ne peux m'accomplir qu'en tant qu'Autre, comment renoncerai-je à mon *Moi*? Tel est l'angoissant dilemme devant lequel la femme en herbe se débat », Simone De Beauvoir, *Le second sexe*. 2 Volumes, Paris : Gallimard, p.100.

and in the social pressures that drive her to marry someone she knows is wrong for her in the first place.

She found herself waking from sleep and crying, but what she was weeping for she had no idea at all. She drew the curtains so that she might not see the great wheel, and then lay watching the circling of light through their thin stuff. [...] The persistent monotony of that flickering cycle seemed a revelation of an appalling and intimate truth; it was like being hypnotized. (*APM*, 113)

Martha, as the narrator comments, “the person who [must] hold herself together [...] who must preserve wholeness through a time of dryness and disintegration” (*Landlocked*, 20) refuses the otherness of the self, its contingent and multiple nature and decides to leave her husband and the custody of her child, in search of oneness and rootedness in her imaginary and idyllic homeland. At this stage, Martha thinks that spatial mobility would lead to a fixed and rooted ground. Yet, in *A ripple from The Storm*, Martha finds herself sucked again into the maddening circularity of political activism with the Communist Party— another circularity that adds to the concentric circles of the labyrinth. In *Landlocked*, she grows obsessed with the idea of breaking out of the labyrinth; and she continues her rites of passage to recapture a lost ideal of feminine selfhood in the golden city of London.

Far away, a long way below was water. She dreamed, night after night, of water, of the sea. She dreamed of swift waves like horses racing. She woke again and again, with the smell of the sea in her nostrils and a tang of salt on her tongue. Then she sank back to sleep to hear waves crashing on rocks, to hear the slap and the suck of waves on distant shores. (*Landlocked*, 247)

The overall logic of evolution finds its reflection in the last volume of the series *The Four-Gated City*, when the expectations of the heroine are all flouted, as she reaches the shores of England. Reflecting on a blackened war-damaged urbanism, Martha perceives the horrific lifelessness of the soil.

It was a yellowish soil. In it was embedded a system of clay pipes, iron pipes, knotted cables. **No roots. No trees** in this street, not **one tree**: therefore, **no roots**. Martha had never before seen soil that was dead, that had no roots. How long had this street been built? For two hundred years this soil had held no life at all. How long did roots live under a crust of air-excluding tarmac? (*FGC*, 16)

The search for roots turns out to be a fruitless enterprise. The self-centered Martha who undertakes a journey seeking identity, out of the labyrinth finds herself in a withering process both in body and soul, in an England, wrecked by the Second World War. The rootlessness is the desolate condition of a soil overwhelmed by asphalt and construction. Nicole Ward Jouve explains this radical move in the sequence from a lively and swarming nature to a hollow and dead construction: “Martha’s voyage has its own sullen, uncompromising logic. She goes from the complex mineral-vegetable-animal-and-human life of the mud house on the kopje to the anonymous shell of London flats”⁷. The heroine’s intellectual journey is strongly impressed by her spatial experience, for the rootless dead land of England brings no solace to her quest.

At this final stage, the journey incarnates the ongoing cycle of what Deleuze refers to as “deterritorializing” and “reterritorializing” moments. Ironically, the ‘deterritorialization’ that Martha feels all along her quest because of her being exiled in Africa does not dissipate as she reaches England. Yet, this process of ‘deterritorialization’ creates lines of flight that

⁷ Nicole Ward Jouve, "Doris Lessing: of Mud and Other Matter: *The Children of Violence*." In *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue*, London & New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 128.

leads the protagonist to ‘reterritorialization’ in a rootless spatiality and a mosaic reality. Ultimately, the journey leads to no tangible position whether in space or in intellectual conviction. Rather than providing Martha with the favorable atmosphere that would satisfy her search for oneness and fixity, England gives her access to an overwhelming universality that swallows up the particularity of her experience. The otherness that Martha felt in Africa does not end through a simple transition in space. Instead, Martha will be condemned to a rootless and contingent existence shot through with bitter nostalgia to the African soil. This rootlessness and fluidity, created out of ‘nomadic mobility’, strongly evokes the critical philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s analysis of the image of the rhizome, which is closer to a labyrinth in that it ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, in contrast to the tree or the totalitarian root which plots a point and fixes an order. Deleuze and Guattari sustain that “a rhizome is a subterranean stem [that] is absolutely different from roots and radicle. The rhizome assumes very diverse forms, ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers.”⁸ In this light, Martha’s journey incarnates the imagery of the rhizome—another metaphor of the labyrinth— as the roots of the tree, which Martha metaphorically seeks in England, seem to burgeon into a rhizome of bifurcating spokes and filaments. These filaments stand for the different ‘becomings’ that Martha acquires throughout her quest. The heroine finally accepts the different selves that lie within her, as it is translated by her embrace of the universal.

The movement towards the personal leads to the universal. As Jouve puts it, “Martha is meant to grow into a being who achieves a universal, absolute wisdom *through* access to the universal, not through development of the particular.”⁹ The deviance into the general seals Martha’s fruitless personal quest and signals its insignificance in the muddle of universality. The protagonist’s quest for identity ends in the formation a universal consciousness, which opens the horizon of the self to embrace difference and change. The labyrinth of the quest for self is an eternal movement but the way out is first the way in.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 7.

⁹ Nicole Ward Jouve, “Doris Lessing: of Mud and Other Matter: *The Children of Violence*,” *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*, London & New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 136.

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