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## A Matrifocal Study of Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark*

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The paper intends to look at Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* from a matrifocal perspective, i.e. from the point of a mother. Lessing's tumultuous relationship with her mother has often found place in her works, resulting in a negative portrayal of the smothering effect of a mother, especially in her earlier works. *The Summer Before the Dark*, however, is different in this regard as Lessing here offers a sympathetic portrayal of a mother. And indeed, one can read the entire novel as the story of a mother on a successful quest for her identity. This search of a woman for her true self, primarily as a mother, is what this paper intends to explore.

Doris Lessing's novel *The Summer Before the Dark* and its protagonist Kate Brown have received a lot of attention from various critics and scholars who have dealt with and brought forward various aspects of the novel and its protagonist. This paper proposes to forward a matrifocal reading of the text, i.e. it will "attend to and accentuate the maternal thematic" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 3) in the given text.

The centrality of the mother figure and the school of motherhood studies has developed steadfastly in the last few decades. It has been realized that motherhood is an essential aspect of feminism and women studies and that it cannot be overlooked if feminist studies have to voice the experience of womanhood completely. The emergence of texts that focus solely on the experience of the mother has happened majorly after the emergence of the postmodern novels of the 70s and 80s. Formerly, the women centric works, few though they were, focused more on the experience of the daughter than the mother and according to Hirsch, these were plots that gave mother the central role, and replaced the previously centralized figures of "fathers, brothers, husbands and male lovers." (qtd in Podnieks and O'Reilly 9) Brenda O. Dally and Maureen T. Reddy in their work *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities* have named this phenomenon "daughter-centricity" defining it as the idea that only a "few texts hold fast to a maternal perspective" (qtd in Podnieks and O'Reilly 33). In such texts, one learned "less about what it is like to mother than about what it is like to be mothered, even when the author has had both experiences." (qtd in Podnieks and O'Reilly 2)

This statement holds true for the initial novels of Lessing too. Though she was already a mother when her first novel was published, her first few novels, especially those of *The Children of Violence* series depict more what it is like to be mothered than to be a mother. Though this idea of "being mothered" is repetitive throughout her fiction and has highly autobiographical shades, *The Summer Before the Dark* marks a shift from this theme by focusing on the experience of mothering and motherhood, thus qualifying to be described as a "matrifocal text".

Emily Jeremiah notes that maternal writing “entails a publicizing of maternal experience, and it subverts the traditional notion of mother as an instinctual, purely corporeal being” (qtd in Podnieks and O’Reilly 5). Reading *The Summer Before the Dark* from the matrifocal perspective too means engaging with the text in such a way that foregrounds the aspect of Kate’s role, feelings and development as a mother throughout the novel. And it is easy to see that Kate enacts first and foremost the role of a mother in the text. When we are introduced to her for the first time, she is standing just outside her home, engaged in watching the kettle boil and thinking of her children. This aspect of Kate as a mother keeps repeating throughout the text, indeed it would not be exaggerating to say that she is first and foremost a mother to all. Her motherhood, though it proves to be an emotionally excruciating task very often, expands itself not only over her children, but also at Global Food where she mothers the international delegates, her lover Jeffrey and to some extent, though for sure in a very different and unattached way, to Maureen. Kate’s journey in the novel, which has often been compared to a quest narrative, involves her realization of the dissatisfaction that the stereotyped roles she has taken upon herself and a journey to find a new, truer self. And one of the major roles she has taken upon herself is that of the mother. The novel, then, can also be read as her disenchantment with the stereotyped motherhood or in the words of Susan Maushart, an urge to “unmask motherhood” (qtd in Podnieks and O’Reilly 3). This mask of motherhood “confers an idealized and hence unattainable image of motherhood that causes women to feel guilt and anxiety about their own (often messy and guilty) experiences of mothering.” (Podnieks and O’Reilly 3) however, as the novel progresses, we see an unmasking of this motherhood happens that helps Kate find a new personality, free from the burdens of her stereotyped earlier roles.

The first section of the novel “At Home” presents before us the image of a woman who, like the kettle she is waiting to boil, is waiting for something inside her to reach the boiling point so that she can turn her life into something different, even though she is not yet aware of the fact. The first that we hear of her children, which happens in the second page of the novel itself, brings it to the reader’s notice that Kate is confounded by a lot of questions regarding her relationship with her children. “Perhaps she had been insensitive? Perhaps both Tim and Eileen—who were after all grown up, were nineteen and twenty-two — had not enjoyed the day’s small contrivings as much as it had seemed . . .” (Lessing 4).

This doubt which Kate harbors in her mind about her incapability as a mother and her children’s refusal to treat her as she thinks she should be, forms a sort of motif in the novel. Again and again, Kate thinks of how her family has treated her after all the sacrifices she has made for them, and feels so terrified of what she might discover as an answer that she decides to postpone it again and again. The reader encounters this feeling of helplessness, of being left all alone after she has given her best years to her family and specially her children again and again in the novel. “It was being taken for granted that she would fit herself in somewhere — how very flexible she was being, just as always, ever since the children were born.” (22)

And again she cannot stop thinking of her children’s attitude towards her even when she is with her sick “lover” Jeffrey:

Looking back at a typical family scene, during the adolescence of her four, she saw herself at one end of the table, tender and swollen like a goose's fattening liver with the frightful pressure of four battling and expanding egos that were all in one way or other in conflict or confluence with herself, a focus, a balancing point. (98)

Through Kate then, Lessing perpetually questions the experience of mothering and motherhood and puts before her readers in black and white the emotional trauma and the painful experience that motherhood can get, thus "unmasking" the ideal of motherhood where such an imaginary ideal of motherhood is created that the individual feels guilty if she experiences anything but bliss out of her mothering experience, and therefore speaking out or writing of the excruciating aspect of mothering tends to become a daunting task. Lessing, however, in this text, continues to mirror this aspect of motherhood repetitively through the novel, "During those years she felt as if she were locked forever in a large box with four perpetually exploding egos" (99).

But the training of being a mother is so ingrained in Kate's character that for a time being it seems to become the major aspect of her character, her very being. After her children and her husband go to their various destinations and Kate is made to take up a translating job with Global Food, her mothering continues. The delegates that visit Global Food find Kate a very sympathetic and warm personality who takes care of their small needs even when it is not a part of her job and becomes a favorite with all the visiting delegates. So much is this quality of nurturing admired that Kate is given a promotion in a job that was initially to last only one month. "She had become what she was: a nurse, or a nanny, like Charlie Cooper. A mother" (33).

Kate is aware of the fact that this quality, this mothering touch that she provides at the institution is what has kept her there longer than she was asked to also earning her a promotion and not merely her skills at translating Portuguese at which she is as good as a professional. And this also causes a feeling of uneasiness in Kate because she realizes that on her professional front too she is being limited to what she has been doing for a very long and wants to get out of. However, at this stage in the novel, this awareness on her part is not followed by a strong will to change her situation, she is still afraid of the "cold wind" blowing from the future and despite being harrowed by motherhood, she till this point cannot gather her courage to get out of this role, or even openly admit to herself how she feels about her children, their treatment of her and motherhood. So much so is this inner restriction that she carries this motherly role to a great extent when she embarks on the role of a woman with a younger lover in the form of Jeffrey.

As their trip to Spain begins, Kate who does not feel comfortable playing the role of a lover starts comparing the young people on the beaches and, at times even Jeffrey, to her children. She is unable to stop feeling that standing

"on the edge of a mile of soiled and scuffed sand that glittered with banal moonlight, watching a hundred or so young people, some younger than her own children, besides a young man who—it was no use pretending otherwise—made her feel maternal. Almost she

could have said: There, there, it will be better soon, and hugged him. She was actually thinking like a mother . . .” (92).

However, with this trip begins a change in the maternal Kate. Right from the time she is with Jeffrey she tries to control her overtly maternal feelings that have dominated her entire life so far. And it is from there that the route for the new Kate who emerges at the end of the novel starts being paved.

Though it is very difficult for her and she has to keep reminding herself of it again and again, Kate tries her best not to feel maternally responsible towards Jeffrey, who is a grown up individual and is perfectly capable of taking his decisions. This is especially true of the time when Jeffrey starts to fall sick from the very beginning of their trip but refuses to take Kate’s advice to see a doctor, believing him to be strong enough for the trip. Though Kate feels that Jeffrey is not strong enough and that this trip would be a mistake, she stops herself from being maternal by asking him to see a doctor again and plays along. “She could hear his breathing. She did not like the sound of it. If he had been one of her sons, she would be thinking about calling the doctor in tomorrow—she must stop this at once!” (96).

This trip to Spain with her young ‘lover’ Jeffrey is what sets the clock ticking in Kate’s mind and the process of accepting the experience of motherhood as it has been—including all the pain and hopelessness it has brought, an aspect which Kate was unable to face till now—begins. The illness of Jeffrey plays an important role in this process not only by making her acutely aware of her overtly submissive tendencies that so many years of mothering have brought on her, but also by giving her the time and the opportunity to think about and accept those aspects of motherhood she has hitherto been afraid of facing.

What Lessing has been bold enough to describe from here onwards of Kate’s experience is that of maternal ambivalence, defined by Rozsiska Parker as “a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side.” (qtd in Podnieks and O’Reilly 15). In the case of Kate, she has kept these feelings of anger and dissatisfaction with regards to her children too long at bay and now, when the opportunity presents itself, these subdued feelings of being wronged by her children come on the surface. “Besides she was still able to savour moments like these, without pressures of any kind, after the years of living inside the timetable of other people’s needs” (96).

Now that she decides to shake herself free of all responsibility, including that of Jeffrey’s health, she can think for herself and look into the shape that her life took after her marriage and motherhood, accepting the negative impact motherhood has had on her personality. She feels that, “It was between Kate the girl who had married Michael, and Kate of three years ago which was when she had become conscious there was something to examine, the rot had set in” (97).

Using Kate as her vehicle, Lessing at many places gives a strong voice to the condition and experiences of all mother in general who have a tough time maintaining the balance in their families and have to sacrifice their wishes and egos in order that others can live together,

often receiving no thanks in return. “And all families with adolescents were like this. At the hub of each was a mother, a woman, sparks flying off her in all directions as the psyches ground together like pebbles on a beach in a storm” (99).

And again:

For why should it be necessary for a mother to be there like a grindstone at the heart of everything? Looking back it seemed as if she had been at everybody’s beck and call, always available, always criticized, always being bled to feed these—monsters (99-100).

This process of facing this painful side of her mothering experience gains an upper hand in her memories as she sits on the balcony during Jeffrey’s sickness: “With three small children, and then four, she had had to fight for qualities that had not been even in her vocabulary. Patience. Self-discipline. Self-control. Self-abnegation. Chastity. Adaptability to others—this above all” (102). And she pities herself thinking, “Mother was like an uncertain quantity. She was like an old nurse who had given her years to the family and must now be put up with” (105).

This time that she gets to spent by herself, rather is forced to spent by herself, being stranded alone due to Jeffrey’s illness first in the inner regions of Spain with nowhere to go and later when she feels sick herself and stays alone in the hotel room in London sets the stage for the changed Kate, specially the changed and less involved and more independent mother that she becomes by the end of the novel. Sitting alone in the hotel room in Spain, she gets a feeling that her future “was not going to be a continuation of the immediate past. . . .No, the future would continue from where she had left off as a child. . . .All those years were now seeming like a betrayal of what she really was” (140).

However, this process of accepting the past for its true value, for what it had been, comes out as being a task not easy to accomplish. Time and again, Kate wants to relapse into her old routine and longs for her family and the “warm shelter” of her house to be protected from the “cold wind” from the unknown future that shall come with embracing the change and shall mean getting out of her comfort zone. The second and third sections of the novel thus prepare Kate for the difficult yet rewarding path she has decided to choose to change her personality, most importantly to come face to face and accept her ambivalent feelings towards motherhood and become an individual who no longer exists only as a mother and a wife, i.e. a person who exists only with respect to others as she has done till now, but emerges, or at least makes a beginning towards being a person with her own likes and dislikes and affirming her right with respect to her life by the time we say her goodbye.

By the time the novel and Kate reach Maureen’s flat, the process of change is beginning to show outwardly. The first sign of self-assertion occurs in the form of her taking an instinctual decision to stay at a flat till her family comes back. She also decides to keep away from them as long as possible—something the old motherly Kate wouldn’t have been able to. Once she starts living with Maureen, who is an adolescent too and her children’s age, she begins contemplating the idea of not ever becoming what her family is used to seeing her as, and for the first time this idea of hurting the sentiments of her children and not getting their approval

does not deter her, “. . .surely she couldn't stay as she was? Could she? What an interesting idea! But the family would, as it is said, have a fit. The idea was prickling her pleasurably . . .” (184).

Coming to Maureen's flat in a shrunken state, and much less attractive and noticeable than she has ever been before sets her pondering about the role the quality of visibility has had on shaping her personality and she realizes that it has done her more harm than good, leaving her on the mercy of others' perception of her. It is during her stay with Maureen that she reaches the final limits of detached motherhood, of being the mother who does not sacrifice herself completely for her children but also asserts the right to her on happiness. The relationship between Kate and Maureen has been compared by critics to that of a surrogate mother-daughter and at times Maureen has also been looked at as Kate's alter-ego. Whichever way one chooses to look at their relationship, it is clear that this time the degree of Kate's involvement in Maureen's affairs is far less than her degree of involvement before and this is not merely due to the fact that Kate feels Maureen would not like any interference, but because Kate feels she has had enough of mothering. Though, at times the old Kate seems to reaffirm itself, it is stifled effectively by the new confidence Kate has achieved, symbolized by the gray band in her hair. “Her face had aged. Noticeably. . . .The light that is the desire to please had gone out. . . .Her hair—well, no one could overlook that!” (269).

And the role Maureen plays in this reaffirmation is major. At a time when Kate seems to be, after all the realization and reaffirmation of her true self, sliding into her old role of the fussing, caring, sacrificing mother when she learns of the arrival of Tim early than expected, it is Maureen's broken engagement and her outburst at becoming years later what Kate is today, Kate is jostled back into her present state of detachment. This is exemplified not only by her act of cancelling all the preparations she had ordered for readying the house by the time her children returned, asking them to make preparations for their unexpected arrivals and continuing her soul-searching but also by her attitude to Maureen, whose dilemma she understands well but refuses to take the burden of being guilty of influencing her to not get married or try to console her or take her responsibility when she is in an adolescent fit of anger. After having spent years in her household doing exactly this—taking brunt of all the emotional outbursts and unnecessary guilt, this is a marked change in Kate. In fact, from then on, her relationship with Maureen takes on a new dimension, where they both treat each other almost as equals, Kate sharing with her, and only her in the course of the novel, her dream of the seal and is also able to complete her dream of the seal in that flat.

As a result of all such attempts and experiences, the Kate that passes out of Maureen's house can best be summarized by her intention to keep her hair as it is, and not give way to anybody's and everybody's decision about how she should look and what she should do. “But now she was saying no: no, no, no, NO: a statement which would be concentrated in her hair” (270).

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