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Martha Quest: Exile from Patriarchy and Quest for Identity

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“I guess I know my name, /I guess I know where I can find my name/ Carved in the shed to tell me who I am” (40-42)

Abstract: Lessing in *Martha Quest* focuses on the women’s problems and shows that a woman has no choice but to bow down to social conventions, traditions and moral obligations. This novel concentrates on Martha’s life on the veld with her parents as well as in the larger context of the South African white society. For the perceiving consciousness of the heroine, however, the family constitutes an early experience, an early pre-figurement of the power of authoritarian, patriarchal society. The story of Martha’s growth in early parts is therefore the story of her will, struggling against the persuasive power of the family in search of an identity. Only when she knows who she is, where she fits into society, which of her different roles is meaningful, can she grow.

Keywords: identity, exile, patriarchy, traditions, culture, family.

The vast fictional space of the *Children of Violence* seems to have been necessitated by Lessing’s creative ambition to explore the theme of search for identity in relation to a highly complex spectrum constituted by the forces of the family, society, politics and history. Accordingly Lessing places the feminine consciousness of her protagonist of the series – Martha Quest, at the very centre of the spectrum and goes on to examine a whole drama of conflict and tensions with its psychological and socio-political implications.

Martha Quest (1952) is the first volume of Doris Lessing’s *Children of Violence*. A great part of *Martha Quest* therefore, describes the protagonist’s struggle against the conditioning forces of the family. Martha Quest is a typical teenage girl. And yet, in so many other ways, she is not. Set in a particular time-the eve of World War II-and in a particular place-the British colony of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe)-the novel offers countless opportunities for the reader to reflect on issues that continue to plague us today: racism and religious prejudice, gender roles and stereotypes, the dominance of one society over another, and the encroachment of modern thinking on established tradition. But it is Martha's own struggles with these issues that give the book its power and insight. Martha is, like many young people, trying to make sense of the conflicts that are inevitable in a country simmering with social unrest, and in a world on the brink of war. She has developed most of her beliefs from books she has read-everything from fairy tales to sophisticated political tracts-but, living within the sheltered confines of her parent's colonial farm, has yet to apply these beliefs to real life.

Martha Quest begins with Martha in the sun, positioned in opposition to her mother and her mother’s friend, Mrs. Van Rensberg “a fat and earthy housekeeping woman” (*Martha Quest* 20),

both of whom are “screened from the sun by a golden shower creeper” (9), gossiping and knitting wool; Martha is reading in the sun, defiantly, determinedly, though the light hurts her eyes. Martha is seen “in an agony of adolescent misery” (7) reacting violently against the stereotypical role of women- the earliest indication of her exile from the society around her, her rejection of the role and the role models offered to her, and her own attempts at individuation. The two elderly women knitting in the shade offer an image of what Simone de Beauvoir calls “immanence”, female entrapment in the “narrow round of uncreative and repetitious duties” traditionally associated with women. “Everything was the same; intolerable that they should have been saying the same things ever since she could remember” (12). Martha’s defiance suggests that she is resisting the fate being spun for her, refusing the destiny represented by the women in the shade.

Two elderly woman sat knitting on that part of the veranda which was screened from the sun by a golden shower creeper: the tough stems were so thick with flower it was as if the glaring afternoon was damned against them in a surf of its own light made visible in the dripping.... They were Mrs. Quest and Mrs. Rensberg; and Martha Quest, a girl of fifteen, sat on the steps in full sunshine, clumsily twisted herself to keep the glare from her book with her own shadow. (10)

Martha’s identity, however, is closely associated with the society into which she was born, as signaled by Lessing who tells us that from adolescence on “she was often resentfully conscious that she was expected to carry a burden that young people of earlier times knew nothing about” (*Martha Quest* 8) (Labovitz 150). Martha’s mother, Mrs. Quest, is depicted as frustrated middle-aged woman living a traditional married life, attempting to compensate for her disappointments by domineering her family and especially her daughter, Martha. The society depicted is no doubt patriarchal, but given Mrs. Quest’s domineering impulse, it is she who presents a real psychological threat for Martha. Here patriarchy is so much internalized in Martha's mother that ultimately she becomes a strong tool of imposing it on her daughter. Mrs. Quest once commented about Martha’s career:

Mrs. Quest aggressively stated that Martha was clever and would have a career.... Mrs. Quest used the word ‘career’ not in terms of something that Martha might actually do, such as doctoring, or the law, but as a kind of stick to beat the world with, as if she were saying, ‘My daughter will be somebody...’(12).

Martha resents everything her mother stands for, and rebels by despising her mother’s ideals which include such Victorian values as regarding women as mainly wives and mothers, sexuality is a taboo. She wants to turn Martha into a nice middle class girl and rid her off “silly ideas” about politics. She also wants her to get properly married that is to get safely settled as wife and mother in the institution of marriage. Representing as she does the conditioning power of conventional attitudes towards sexuality, society and politics, it is not surprising that Martha sees her as a part of a nightmare:

... Mrs. Quest’s voice murmured like the spells of a witch, ‘You must be tired, darling; don’t overtire yourself, dear’... the eternal mother holding sleep and death in her twin hands like a sweet and poisonous cloud of forgetfulness - that was

how she saw her, like a baneful figure in the nightmare in which she herself was caught.(38)

Lessing places Martha Quest in a position where she daily faces the cultural assumptions about being and growing up female. The clashes between Martha and her mother are greatly due the fact that Martha resists her mother's views of the position of the females in their society, and thus she subverts her mother's as well as her culture's assumptions by rebelling against them. Uncovering layers of consciousness, Lessing takes Martha on a journey where she will finally explore the inner universe of consciousness and the dream world.

In *Martha Quest*, Lessing traces various stages in the personality of Martha who passes from girlhood to womanhood on a farm in Rhodesia. Mrs. Quest is shaping Martha strictly according to English traditions. Mrs. Quest is responsible for her daughter's limitations. She becomes an object of Martha's fury and desperation and she wants to escape Mrs. Quest's evil influence. In her book Nancy Friday shows how mothers forcefully and intentionally constrain and control daughters by keeping them from individuality. Mothers also denied their daughter's sexuality, and keep them from men. Mothers tend to make daughters in their own image: since they have been denied their own sexuality, when they themselves have become mothers, they must deny sexuality to their daughters (*My Mother/ My Self* 55). By stopping Martha from keeping the company of men and by refusing to talk about sexuality Mrs. Quest denies the existence of the whole issue and the fact that Martha is a sexual being.

According to Knapp (139), the very existence of Mrs. Quest is an insult to all Martha's ideals. The realization of this can be seen in the fact that Martha is in a constant struggle against her mother. Holmquist (29) emphasizes that the primary socializing agent within Martha's family is mother. By this she refers to the fact that Mrs. Quest has reached a position of power in the family; Mr. Quest stays in the background and lets his wife control their everyday life, and thus she becomes the patriarch of the family and makes the decision of who they should meet. She does not like that Martha should meet men, especially Jewish shopkeepers- the Cohen boys- for several reasons. But as far as Martha is concerned, 'talking to them exhilarated her, everything seemed easy.' She walked over to the Kaffir store when her parents made the trip to the station; sometimes she got a lift from a passing car. Sometimes, though secretly, since this was forbidden, she rode on her bicycle. But there was always uneasiness about this friendship, because of Mrs. Quest; only last week she had challenged Martha. Being what she was, she could not say outright. "I don't want you to know Jewish shopkeepers." Martha not only defies her mother's wish of remaining aloof from the Cohen boys, but on the contrary becomes friendlier with them and frankly tells her mother one day:

I want to see the Cohen boys.

You're making friends with them? , demurred Mrs. Quest.

I thought we always were friends with them, said Martha scornfully...and the only reason they did not continually meet was an inconvenience of some sort.... (46)

The mother often wants to keep her daughter close, but at the same-time she also pushes her into adulthood. This ambivalence creates anxiety in the daughter and provokes attempts by her to break away from the mother (Chodorow 135). The anxiety leads Martha to rebellion against mother. In order to break away from Mrs. Quest, she takes what steps she can toward internal

feelings of individuation as well as relational stability and external independence. The patriarchal practices which reduce women's status to inferior social beings are further perpetuated by myths and traditions which have been embedded in the fabric of every society. According to V.A.Novarra

The myth related to the role of women in Britain prescribes that a mother should devote herself to providing a secure environment for small children. A married woman cannot pursue a career which demands mobility. Works of art by women still have to be judged as 'women's work.' Membership of an all-male club or society can be prestigious membership of a woman's organization is a subject for facetious remark. (317)

As Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*:

One is not born woman, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine. (249)

Martha is very articulate in pronouncing her choices. She expresses her likes and dislikes boldly, openly and in a more defiant manner. Mrs. Quest wants that her daughter should not go alone on the streets as she is afraid of the black natives who often rape white girls. But here also Martha opposes her mother and announces: "If I don't get a lift, I'll walk, which of course was absurd, infringed one of the taboos – young white girl walking alone, etc" (56). Martha Quest, in fact is an idealist in revolt against the snobbery of her parents. She tries to live life to the full with every nerve, emotion and instinct bared to experience.

In a patriarchal society, the birth of a female child is traditionally less welcome than that of the male. Being born a boy is itself a privilege. Investment in upbringing of a girl is relatively less: the major goal of her being marriage, she is looked down upon as a transitory member of the family in contrast with the boy, who is supposed to be transmitter of the family name to future generations and is, therefore more carefully and lovingly brought up and given more advantages. This is true not only of Indian society but also of the White society in British colonies like Rhodesia where similar attitudes prevail. Martha Quest also becomes aware of how gender discrimination is practiced in her family. While her younger brother "with half her brains" was put in an "expensive school, like a visitor from a more prosperous world" (40), she was studying in a local school. The lines of Lord Tennyson are a true picture of the status of women in today's time.

Man for the field and women for the hearth:
 Man for the sword and for the needle she:
 Man with head and woman with the heart:
 Man to command and woman to obey;
 All else confusion. (427-31)

Women were restricted to private sphere and any attempt to come out was supposed to be a breach of the patriarchal law. Patriarchy considers men as superior beings possessing every power to subdue the weaker sex (women). The gender inequality has created unlawful male authority over women. Today, the woman is confident, assertive, self-assured and ambitious; she is also conscious of her independent identity. Martha "was becoming aware of several

disconnected strands of her thinking” (40). The awareness of the biased attitude makes her self-reliant and defiant towards her parents and she decides to seek her own identity and destiny outside the parental hold.

Mrs. Quest, in her youth, had been “a pretty and athletic-looking English girl with light brown hair and blue eyes as candid as spring sunshine, and she was now exactly as she would have been she remained in England” (12). Now in Rhodesia, she is looking after her farmer husband and teenage daughter with utmost care, like a typical English matron. She wants her daughter to be a different girl from the bunch of the fast girls and did not consider her daughter to be on a level with Marnie, ‘whom she found in altogether bad taste, wearing grown up clothes and lipstick at fifteen and talking about boys’ (16). Mrs. Quest like all other mothers wants her daughter to maintain her dignity as she thinks, ‘a man will never marry a girl he does not respect’ (15). Foregrounding the mother-daughter relationship, Irigaray argues that the woman’s inability to represent herself is due to the undermining of the mother-daughter bond by and in the symbolic order. Motherhood is allowed only a small space, denied economic or social status and separated from the very aspect of sexuality. The daughter in the patriarchal system must separate from the mother in order to gain her own identity. The daughter is thus ‘exiled’ from her first identity and history.

Despite several restrictions, Martha finally rebels against her parents. One day she tries to make changes in her dress:

Standing before the mirror, she took a pair of scissors and severed the bodice from the shirt of her dress. She was trying to make folds lie like Marnie’s, when the door opened, and her father came in. He stopped with an embarrassed look at his daughter ... He said gruffly ‘What are you doing?’.... ‘Your mother won’t like you cutting your dresses to pieces’(26).

She said defiantly: ‘Dad why should I wear dresses like kid of ten?’ And when her mother enters the scene, she argues: I’m sixteen, said Martha, between set teeth, in a stifled voice.... My dear, nice girls don’t wear clothes like this until -I’m not a nice girl, broke in Martha, and suddenly burst into laughter. (21)

Joanne Cooke (16) remarks that woman’s desire to be independent, to be courageous and to dress enables her to grow up both strong and confident and deride the feminine traits- weak will, dependence and shyness. She hates to be an insignificant victim or object for other’s (male) use and pleasure, woman in our society are still trained from infancy to entertain, to please and to serve man. Martha struggles for psychological liberation from her mother through defiance and rebels against Mrs. Quest’s views about the issues of body, weight, clothes and hair style.

Martha becomes critical of her family, especially of her mother, for her mother and home represent bad, and the outside world represents good. She strives in every way to be different from her mother. In this case her “solution again involves defensive splitting, along with projection, introjections and the creation of arbitrary boundaries by negative identification (I am what she is not)” (Chodorow 137). These features of negative identification are there in Martha during her adolescence and even when she is a mature woman.

Also Labovitz (147) points that the crucial place for the female heroine is the family, and it is within the family, where Martha meets her initial failure: “her difficult family relationships are never satisfactorily resolved, especially that with her mother”. Sexuality is one of the major issues between Martha and Mrs. Quest, in the beginning, their relationship is strongly affected by “the battle of clothes” (32) which actually has nothing to do with clothes. It is almost impossible for Mrs. Quest to see her daughter as a young woman; she prefers treating her more like a child: “She would smooth the childish dresses down over Martha’s body, so that the girl stood hunched with resentment, and say with an embarrassed coyness, ‘Dear me, you are getting a pouter pigeon, are you?’”(28) Finally, the battle of clothes culminates when Martha starts to make changes on a dress she wants to wear in a dancing party. Mrs. Quest happens to burst in, and is shocked to see Martha naked, the dress in her hands, than she “came quickly across the room, and laid her hands on either side of the girl’s waist, as if trying to press her back into girlhood” (30). Martha lifts her hand and shudders with disgust at the touch of her mother. She almost slaps her mother across the face.

From this scene about the dance dress the real battle between Martha and mother starts Marianne Hirsch (9), the writer of *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* points out, that a continued allegiance to the mother appears as regressive and potentially lethal, it must be transcended; a daughter can reach maturity only through an angry and hostile break from the mother. This view applies to Martha too, as Labovitz (148) remarks, in order to become a totally realized human being Martha needs to liberate herself from the inhibiting hold of the unsatisfactory mother-daughter relationship.

In order to succeed her own attempts of individuation, Martha finally flees her mother. Since financial independence is necessary to seek security and liberation, Martha puts in all her efforts to take up some job without letting her parents know about her plans. Her decision to leave home and go to nearby town to work as a secretary is again an act of rebellion towards her mother; Martha hears about the job from her friend Joss who Mrs. Quest does not approve of. Mrs. Quest tries to protest that Martha could have got a job through her parents’ friends, but this makes Martha even more eager to take the job from Joss’ relatives. Finally she gets a job in the town, with the help of her Jewish friend Joss Cohen, Martha informs her parents about her achievement only after getting it. At the age of eighteen she closes the home door, and ‘behind it was the farm, and the girl who had been created by it. It no longer concerned her. Finished. She could forget it. She was a new person, and... an altogether *new* life was beginning’ (110). When Joss writes her about the vacancy in his uncle’s firm,

She felt as if a phase of life has ended, and that now a new one should begin; ... With Joss’ letter in her hand, she walked onto the veranda, and informed her parents in a hasty way, that she was taking a job in the town; and she hardly heard their startled queries. It all seemed so easy now. ‘But you can’t expect me to stay here for the rest of my life!’(108)

Martha is a highly critical girl. And this power of critical detachment is the gift of the Cohen brothers living at the station, who always provide her with books on sexuality, sociology, economics, psychology and politics. The reading of these books has given her a clear picture of herself from the outside. As one who has been “formed by literature” (166), Martha “sees herself

... through literature” (10). She turns to books as “guides” in her “journey of discovery” (199-200) and reads with the question, “What does this say about my life?” But the books that shape her consciousness are a complicated legacy. They enable her to imagine “something better,” to envision an “ideal landscape of white cities and noble people” (27), but they give no clue how she can attain this ideal. Since books are written from inside the system she is trying to understand, they cannot help her to see it from outside; rather they entrench her more firmly within it.

Martha Quest reveals that a traditional mother whether in England, wants her daughter to be a good girl and “properly married.” Simone de Beauvoir says that “a generous mother, who sincerely seeks her child’s welfare, will as rule think that it is wiser to make a ‘true women’ of her, since society will more readily accept her if this is done” (309). Mrs. Quest tries to fulfill her duty as mother by bringing up her daughter as models of grace, although Martha resents the maternal authority. Times have changed since her mother’s days and moreover daughters are socially aware girls rather than conforming girls who happily accept their roles.

In *Martha Quest*, Mrs. Quest tries to project herself upon Martha and tries to model her daughter according to her own wishes. Martha revolts against her and asserts her independence but Mrs. Quest feels betrayed. Mrs. Quest acts as an alert guardian of her daughter. Simone de Beauvoir observes in this connection, “the daughter is for the mother at once her double and another person, the mother is at once over-winningly affectionate and hostile towards her daughter: she saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of revenging herself of it” (309).

In other words, a daughter is an alter ego of her mother. The mother wants to realize her unfulfilled dreams through her daughter.

This pressure of forces trying to condition her is felt by Martha outside the immediate circle of the family also. Whether it is in her career as a typist working in a legal firm owned by Mr. Jasper Cohen, or whether it is in her exposure to South African collective life in the form of the ‘sports club’, Martha finds herself in a situation where other forces want to mould her according to their needs without taking into account her individuality. The Sports Club is an institution which provides norm for the sex role behaviour of white young middle class men and women. In the club all is so public; anything is permissible – the romances, the flirtations, the quarrels, provided they are shared. The club is flooded with a false feeling of good will, friendliness and equality. It is supposedly free from class divisions, caste-barriers, and pressures of the political reality outside. Social interactions in the club require a strongly stereotyped behaviour. Men treat women with a ritualized adoration to which women respond in an understanding and sexually pleasing manner. In the town Martha meets her first boyfriend, Donovan Anderson, who is mostly interested in the way Martha dresses and behaves. The relationship between Martha and Donovan is far from being a romantic one. Martha as a woman is the object, and Donovan is the one who holds the strings: the same pattern is present throughout the relationship. Donovan tells Martha how she should have her hair and what kind of clothes she should wear. Soon Martha starts to have feelings of dislike towards Donovan, and they drift apart.

Martha refers that her sexuality has been forged by the books: her sexuality has been constructed by her readings in the conduct for the “social currents” (115), that reach her even on “the solitary veld” (42,185), so that, when she arrives in the town, she instantly acquires the “new skilled

vivacity which was part of her equipment as a girl about town... together with a new vocabulary” (111). She shapes her appearance to “the tall, broad-shouldered, slim-hipped, long-legged” image of woman in magazines “just before the war” (141), as she tailors her sexual and emotional responses to the “romantic traditions of love” that books leave her “heir to” (194). She imagines that each man she meets rescue her, surrounds her with illusions, and “submits...with a demure, childish compliance, as if she were under a spell” (159) – first to Billy, then to Donovan, Adolph, and finally to Douglas. Martha becomes disgusted with the sexual behaviour of the wolves, like Binkie Maynard, Douglas Knowell, Donovan, Percy, Andrew Mathews, Adolph King, who “mess around like kids, not really making love properly” (192). Somewhat desperately she has her first sexual act with a Polish Jew called Adolph King. Thus Martha in her rebellious mood has her first love affair with a man she is not the slightest in love with. The affair however comes to an end on racial ground.

Carried like a twig through the whirlpool and eddies of adult life, Martha ultimately ends up engaged to a man she barely knows. She is determined to be happy. The engagement ring her mother forces on her “like a chain” (235) is the first of the many rings that pervade the imagery of the next novel. But the closure is not complete, for though “she would marry... she also heard a voice remarking calmly that she would not stay married” (243). She is nagged by an inner voice that tells her she is following in the footsteps of her mother's own unfulfilling marriage. The point of view angles oddly, as it does at the end of all these novels, to the sardonic perspective of Magistrate Maynard, “Four more weddings to get through. Well, he thought cynically, that would be four divorces for him to deal with in due time”; and it angles out more widely to register the distant rumblings Martha dimly hears – “She remembered that someone had been saying that Hitler had seized Bohemia and Moravia” (246-47).

Though Martha has never felt lonely in the veld before, when she at this time, announce her marriage with Knowell to her parents, her anxiety extends outward into the physical world, transforming it into the correlative of her inner state:

She was now feeling lost and afraid. She was vividly conscious of the night outside, the vast teeming night, which was so strong, and seemed to be beating down into the room through the low shelter of the thatch, through the mud walls. It was as if the house itself, formed of the stuff and substance of the veld, had turned enemy. (258)

Conclusion:

Thus the novel, *Martha Quest* is a detailed portrayal of Martha's attempts to assert herself and defy traditional norms in sexist society at different levels, such as at the level of parental family on the veld of South Africa, at the financial level through the job of the typist in the city, and finally at the level of sex and marriage. The double standards and dichotomous attitude which continue to operate throughout a woman's life start right in her parents' home. She is prevented from developing her individuality. Thus Martha is shown as constantly rebelling against these traditional taboos and making an attempt towards individual satisfaction and self-realization. With immense compassion Lessing portrays Martha's struggle to balance her strong idealistic beliefs with the realities of adult life, and with the general apathy of her social group. The

following lines from Robert Frost's poem *Snow* aptly concludes Martha's identity journey in words.

“Save us from being cornered by a woman.
Well there's”- She told Fred afterward that in
The pause right there, she thought the dreaded word
Was coming, “God.” But no, he only said
Well, there's- the storm. That says I must go on.
That wants me as a war might if it came
Ask any man.” (256-62)

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