AGING AND DYING IN THE DIARIES OF JANE SOMERS

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Abstract: This paper will present the problems of aging and dying. The main heroine of The Diaries is Jane Somers a middle-aged woman who was very afraid and repelled by the old people and death and she feels very guilty about her attitude towards her mother's and her husband's illnesses and their death. The two novels analysed: ***The Diary of A Good Neighbour*** *and* ***If the Old could...*** *present Jane's evolution from a fearful attitude towards the acceptance and even admiration of old people.*

Keywords: age, death, old, young, love

"Problems of aging and dying in Lessing's work are unexpectedly localized in the always painful and always inescapable mother daughter relationship. They are understandably located in women rather than in men both because Lessing is a woman and because women are on the whole more enslaved to physical appearance than men are. These problems are addressed fully and directly in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*."(Sprague, 1987: 111)

In *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, Lessing also fosters linkage between middle age and old age, the continuum advocated by feminist critic Paula A. Treichler (61). This continuum enables "ageless" readers to face aging and death, to develop self-respect and receptivity to elders, and to acknowledge the capacity for pleasure, regardless of age. Her optimistic message, conveyed through portraits of Kate Brown and Jane Somers, will convert many a reader for whom "old age looms ahead like a calamity". (Waxman Frey:1990: 46-47)

The novel is about a middle-aged heroine, Jane Somers, who learns to face her middle age and future old age through that of Maudie Fowler, a woman past 90 who becomes Jane's substitute mother. *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, initially presents Jane as a less sympathetic character who is the opposite of Kate Brown: she is as self-centred as a childless, recently widowed, attractive 49-year-old can be; obsessed with her own immaculate, studied grooming; entirely focused on a publishing career that she knows she does well; unnurturing; and a cowardly woman. Her cowardice, her inability to deal with her husband Freddie's and her mother's terminal cancers, leads her into many unkindnesses toward them, including emotional withdrawal from them and scarcely disguised repugnance toward their illnesses. Jane Somers - except in her role as a successful magazine editor - is at first nothing to anybody but Jane Somers.

"It is reasonable to think that Janna's need to come to terms with her guilt about her failures of feeling and behaviour toward her mother and her husband represents in part a distancing of Lessing's response to the deaths of her own mother and husband." (Sprague, 1987:117)

Her unloving treatment of her two loved ones and her failed effort to compensate afterward by befriending the elderly Mrs. York (9) constitute Jane's false starts on the way to true *reifung*. These false starts bring self-knowledge, the desire to change herself and take charge of her life - obvious elements of the *Reifungsroman*. Jane summarizes in the first seven pages four years of false starts:

> *"Yet we could not talk to each other. Correction. Did not talk to each other. Correction. He could not talk to me because when he started to try I shied away." (The Diary of a Good Neighbour, p. 4).*

She informs readers that through these false starts she has learned that she is not a nice person: she is selfish, interpreting her husband's and mother's deaths as "unfair" to herself, infecting her with mortality; she is childishly dependent in her private life, "flimsy," in need of "some sort of weight or anchor"; she fears intimacy and love. Yet this ironically intimate diary format, which favours the teller and her claims, counteracts the negative self-portrait that Jane gives; despite her litany of repellent traits, we are disarmed by her candour, then start to like her for the small overtures she makes toward Maudie, and finally applaud her for her increasingly generous and courageous kindnesses toward Maudie.

We know that Jane is making a journey of self-discovery and preparation for her future, the typical pattern of the *Reifungsroman*, when at the beginning of the "diary" she says: *"Meanwhile I was thinking about how I ought to live"* (p. 8). She searches for a way to live through her recollections and analysis of her past. Like Kate Brown, she reviews her marriage - a common motif of the heroine, especially the widowed heroine, in Reifungsroman - but she reveals her different priorities in one passage by giving her marriage three short sentences after four pages of history on her career*:*

"I married in 1963. It was shortly before Joyce came. I have written all that history, and only now have thought to mention that I married." (*The Diary of a GoodNeighbour, p. 80*) She remembers the good sexual relationship in their marriage - and longs for Freddie to make love to her again. Yet she gradually realizes that they never talked and that is what she now wishes they had done:

> *"I lie awake sometimes, and what I want is, not that he should be there to make love to me, though I miss that dreadfully, I want to talk to him. Why didn't I talk to him while he was there?" (The Diary of a Good* Neighbour, *p. 63).*

Such realizations and rearranging of her priorities prepare Jane for future relationships and enable her eventually to like herself more.

Becoming the substitute daughter of Maudie, is another of Jane's vehicles to self-knowledge and self-respect. Jane's relationship with Maudie, she acknowledges, is *"'the one real thing that has happened to me'" (p. 139*). Her determination to make this relationship work is evident when she says: *"I am a friend . . . of Maudie's only because it was something I decided to do. . . . If you undertake to do something, then it is not absurd, at least to you" (The Diary of a Good Neighbour, 229).*

In befriending Maudie, bathing her, feeding her, cleaning up after her in her final illness, and listening to stories of her past, Jane repents her failures with her mother and husband and comforts the shame she feels. Because Jane records her thoughts about what she does in the "privacy" of her diary, readers understand the enormous emotional demands of Jane's undertaking. Jane's ambivalence about Maudie's dependency on her is evident, as is her rationalizing and guilt when she is angry at Maudie. She is horrified at Maudie's condition, yet she forces herself to describe it in detail in her diary. Her diary reveals her courage in cleaning Maudie's home and the excrement on her clothing. Although Jane is so repelled at first by her contact with death and old age that she must soak in a tub for hours after visiting Maudie to re-establish her distance from age and to rejuvenate herself, gradually the baths become shorter, *I had a brief and efficient bath, and have finished writing this, and now I must go to bed."* (p. 75*),"* she forgets the dirt, and she acknowledges the rejuvenating bonds between middle age and senescence as she listens to Maudie's tales. Jane appreciates Maudie's growing trust in her and accepts her dependency. Finally, she understands Maudie's feeling that these are the best years of her life, that *"she [Maudie] is happy now, because of me"* (90) *„She says , I have been thinking, this is the best time of my life.'" „I know you will always come and we can be together."* (*The Diary of a GoodNeighbour, p. 126)*

That Jane is changing is evident in an extraordinary passage of the diary that Jane writes as if she were Maudie recording a day in her life; Jane clearly wants to empathize with Maudie, to leave behind the egocentric Jane: *"I wrote Maudie's day because I want to understand, I do understand a lot more about her"* (*The Diary of a Good Neighbour, p. 130).*

"To be 49 years old and become 90 years old in mind suggests the invalidity of the polarity Anglo-American culture assumes between youth and age." (op. cit, p. 117) Jane's "Maudie" passage captures Maudie's bodily ordeals, the strategy to outwit weakness and tiredness (115), the effort of will to move, as revealed in the repetition of words of self-encouragement *("I have to feed the cat, I have to . . . I have to"*115). The passage also evokes the lonely old woman's longing for Jane's visits in a recurring refrain, "Janna will come." The fragmented sentences suggest Maudie's broken thoughts which reflect her dreams, her memories of her youth or her fantasies of Jane's moving into her apartment. Knowing Maudie by writing her teaches Jane to name the old woman within herself and to live more fully:

> *"I could learn real slow full enjoyment from the very old, who sit on a bench and watch people passing, watch a leaf balancing on the kerb's edge" (The Diary of a GoodNeighbour, p. 171).*

At ninety-two, Maudie still holds on to life and to Janna. This "sullen, sulking furious old woman is in constant rebellion against her physical destruction; she rages in her way against the ravages of time". (117) To Janna *"her hand nevertheless speaks the language of our friendship" (The Diary of a Good Neighbour, 220)*

Learning how Maudie thinks inspires Jane to improve her life in two ways: first, to take some days away from her magazine and have the "fun" of writing a historical novel, for which "it was Maudie who gave me the idea"; second, to accept the emotional commitment of taking her niece Jill into her home. Jane thus connects with an elder and a younger woman, even brings Jill to meet Maudie, and "the trio represent age as a continuum, challenging the polarity between youth and senescence." (op. cit, p. 119)

> *„But I am so used to her, have forgotten how she must strike others. Because of this stranger, the beautiful clean girl, Maudie was stiff, reproachful for exposing her. A cold aloof little person, she said yes and no, did not offer us tea, tried to hide the stains down the front of her dress where she has spilled food. Niece Jill was polite, and secretly appalled. Not at old age; Sister's Georgie's good works will have seen to it that her children will not find that a surprise; but because she had to associate old age and good works with glamorous Aunt Jane." (The Diary of a GoodNeighbour, p.143)*

Janna also learns to experience time differently, as the very young and the very old do. The examples are simple: sitting in a garden watching birds, sitting at a café, looking and listening. This busy woman begins to experience pleasure. She can sit still; she no longer fears the old on streets or park benches; instead she waits "for when they trust me enough to tell me their tales, so full of history" (p. 166). Janna can look past the physical deterioration of others and understand the fragility of her own good health. She is another person, *"not at all that Janna who refused to participate when her husband, her mother were dying. I sit for hours near Maudie, ready to give what my mother, my husband needed from me; my consciousness of what was happening, my participation in it" (The Diary of a GoodNeighbour, 218)*

Jane learns the helplessness of many elders, when a back ailment invalids her for two weeks:

> *"For two weeks, I was exactly like Maudie, exactly like all these old people, anxiously, obsessively wondering, am I going to hold out" (The Diary of a GoodNeighbour, p. 136).*

She uses the same words as Maudie to describe her bodily ills: "*terrible, terrible, terrible!*" (p.137). Recovered, Jane appreciates her health and independence, decides to decrease her working hours at the magazine and enjoy herself in midlife, and works out a compromise between her former fastidiousness of toilette and the "tired slovenliness" that is "the trap of old age" (p. 217). Jane assesses her appearance in the omnipresent mirror and (p. 124) acknowledges that the younger Jane's grooming rituals have become too demanding:

> *"Once I did have my real proper baths every night, once every Sunday night I maintained and polished me, and now I don't, I can't. It is too much for me." (The Diary of a GoodNeighbour, p. 131)*

She rejects the expensively detailed, yet understated style she has been known for and can describe so precisely *("My style is that at first people don't notice, and then their eyes come back and they examine detail, detail, the stitching on a collar, a row of pearl buttons". 66),* and simplifies her rituals to reflect changes in her priorities.

"Janna does not abandon Maudie, she stays with her until she dies, for death is an end in this novel. There is no afterlife. Janna will go on. Her newfound saintly/secular vocation as a good neighbour, not a Good Neighbour, will not end with Maudie's death. In her self-appointed selfish/selfless role, Janna will befriend other old women. "(op. cit, p. 121)

There is an obvious change in Jane's attitude toward death. Attending Maudie in the hospital, Jane can finally observe:

> *"My general air . . . belongs to those who are not upset by dying, death" (The Diary of a GoodNeighbour, p.228)*
>
> *"Once I was so afraid of old age, of death, that I refused to let myself see old people in the streets – they did not exist for me. Now I sit for hours in that ward and watch and marvel and wonder and admire." (The Diary of a GoodNeighbour, 245*).

At the end of the novel, Jane is more receptive to relationships with old people because she succeeded in defeating the fear of old age and death.

"Lessing's heroine Jane Somers challenges her society's dichotomizing of youth and age and reject common assumptions about middle age's complacency, flagging powers, and stagnation. Lessing teaches that middle age is a time for reassessing one's personal history, rediscovering one's selves, making exhilarating changes in one's life, and reordering priorities to make a more intense, pleasurable, and significant old age possible. In middle age, personal authenticity is established, safeguarded, cherished. The personal history of Jane Somers also suggest that middle-aged women acquire a maturer, more confident philosophical wisdom, and an iconoclasm that prompt them to question prevailing cultural notions about sexuality, love, marriage, and death; women learn to identify and redefine the concepts and needs that are basic to their existence. In this novel, a woman truly grows up, truly acquires self-mastery, or as Susan Rubin Suleiman has said, truly "assume . . . [her] own subjecthood" (7). Lessing's fiction reminds readers that although the elasticity and juices of youth may diminish, a great deal takes their place in the years between 40 and 60." (Rubenstein, 2001: p. 29)

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