

## THE MONSTER WITHIN

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*Abstract: This study endeavours to analyze Doris Lessing's novel The Fifth Child with a twofold aim in focus.*

*On the one hand, it is intent on demonstrating that Lessing's dystopian vision of contemporary society becomes an exploration of the limitations of realism by focusing on areas of human experience that it cannot easily convey. This has instigated her experimental realism, which combines such diverse forms as fantasy, apocalypse and myth. In The Fifth Child, which refuses to be prescriptive and always leaves the readers the option to avoid what can only be guessed at, Ben, the child is not an answer or revelation. It is a postmodern ghost-like child who enables Lessing to challenge the reliability of the real in the context of vulnerable social institutions and values.*

*On the other hand, it argues that The Fifth Child carries an embedded political commentary. The representation of Ben is intimately related to the 1980s and what it signified in British culture. Rather than constructing an exclusionary concept of national identity, Lessing attempts a social and political commentary on what critics have signaled as Thatcherism and the consequences of a part of Margaret Thatcher's conservative politics. The Fifth Child identifies the source of social decline precisely in the Thatcherite prioritization of the individual at the expense of society, and the related conception of the family home as an insular fortress, within which the individual is able to protect himself from the outside world.*

*Keywords: Realism, Thatcherism, monstrosity, society, family, individuals.*

It has generally been agreed that Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* remains a landmark, a transitional text in the author's literary production. It marks a change, rupturing Lessing's realism from within, and splintering her creative energies into several different directions. Nevertheless, the period between 1962 and 1974 reveals her growing awareness of realism's limitations, its ability to portray what she perceived as the fantastic nature of her contemporary world. Thus, her use of science fiction, myth, and fantasy disclosed her belief that fabulation was better equipped to render post-war realities. Furthermore, the implausible imaginative resolutions to her texts suggest that she no longer believed in a vision of good that could combat evil.

The path that Lessing has followed, however, shows that her abandonment of realism was temporary. Even though she moves away from realism to explore other literary forms, her subsequent re-examination of it leads her not to reject realism entirely, but to return to it when it seems useful. Thus, Ruth Whittacker is undoubtedly right when she notes that critics are tempted 'to give a spurious cohesion to [Lessing's] fiction, to suggest that she moves steadily from realism to fabulation, as if one excluded the other' (Whittacker 1988: 16). Realism and fabulation are not mutually exclusive: her use of it in *The Fifth Child*, *Ben, in the World*, or *The Good Terrorist*, proves the point.

*The Fifth Child* (1988), its sequel *Ben, in the World* (2000), and *The Good Terrorist* (1985), all have in common violence, domestic terrorism and 'abnormal children', who are the products of either their parents' illusory way of living, or their own illusion of fighting for a certain ideal.

Out of the three novels, *The Fifth Child* is probably Lessing's the most unsettling. An experimental text that eschews the codes of realistic narrative, it is an open-ended novel that

works on multiple levels and refuses the closure of meaning. Lessing does not conform to the patterns of character driven and chronological mode of narration, and she requires another kind of reading. One cannot make sense of her texts, if indeed making sense is the point here, by trying to construe them within the parameters they reject; they operate a paradigm shift. Lessing's text is a literary juxtaposition of gothic, fantasy, realist descriptions and social criticism, so that everything works by way of suggestions, resonances, echoes.

The controversy surrounding the novel *The Fifth Child* and its sequel, *Ben, in the World*, has had important consequences for the reception and critical judgment of Lessing's work in Britain. Two particular issues have preoccupied reviewers and critics. The first is the interest in Lessing's choice with regard to genre and narrative technique; the second focuses on the representation in the text of issues of 'race' and nation. Louise Yelin argues that, in representing Ben as a throwback, Lessing evokes the threat of the 'enemy within' or 'racial other.' She links this to racist elements of British Conservative Party ideology during Margaret Thatcher's governments of the 1980s, arguing that Ben's attacks on Harriet represent an alien invasion of the white British motherland by black people (Yelin 1988: 104). Yelin's argument constructs *The Fifth Child* as one of a number of texts that establish Lessing's 'exclusionary concept of national identity' (Yelin 1988: 106). This reading of the novel as profoundly racist is only possible, because she ignores the generic complexity and ambivalence of narrative perspective in the text.

Seeing these texts as racist positions is, in fact, a failure to understand what Lessing has attempted in these novels in terms of genre and narrative perspective. The novels might make much more sense, and can be seen as opposite to racism, if we are open to the variety of genres they suggest, all belonging to what Deleuze and Guattari define as 'minor literature'.

Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize minor literature as exhibiting three main characteristics: 'the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 18).

Lessing resorts to characteristics of urban gothic, the abject, the monstrous, the fantastic, concepts which help her address some of the most important desires and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural that characterize contemporary society.

Particular relevant to Lessing's late twentieth-century fiction, the conception of 'becoming animal' constitutes an 'absolute deterritorialization...an immobile voyage' (Deleuze and Guattari 35). Deleuze and Guattari suggest that in Kafka's work 'the becoming human of the animal and the becoming-animal of the human' are part of a 'single circuit' (35) that deliberately resists metaphoricity, symbolism and allegory. This attempt to block the impulse to read the human/animal opposition metaphorically is related to the resistance to the idea of literary genre in Lessing's late twentieth-century fiction.

Contemporary monsters are intimately bound to the very human system which they inhabit, and which they subtly undermine. That is, the monster is now part of us, with us, and sometimes even within us. The monstrosity which the child embodies in Lessing's novel is a powerful subversive element that permanently damages the symbolic institution of the family. Evincing the theme of social and familial breakdown, Lessing brings readers face-to-face with the shattered, even grotesque images of the child. Her modern fable of monsterhood 'reworks Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*' as Norma Rowen notes in her article "Frankenstein Revisited" (Rowen 1990: 41-49). Rowen is correct in saying this, but I think Lessing, through the birth of the monstrous, fifth child, reflects the failure of a fantasized boundary that characters erect to wall out the unpleasantness of the world.

'With a minor literature everything is political', observe Deleuze and Guattari in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (17). Political in the sense that the lives and individual

concerns of the characters are always linked to the larger social milieu. It is in the same sense that Lidia Vianu notices the political aspect of Lessing's novels when writing in *British Desperadoes At the Turn of the Millennium* that '[Lessing] cannot and will not separate the political from the private side of life. Her characters must constantly undergo a private ordeal, which is minutely analysed and which ultimately has political reasons' (Vianu 1999: 58). Indeed, *The Fifth Child* also carries an embedded political commentary. The representation of Ben is, as Yelin suggests, intimately related to the 1980s and what it signified in British culture. However, rather than constructing an 'exclusionary concept of national identity' (Yelin 1988: 106), Lessing attempts something rather different: a social and political commentary on what many critics have signaled as Thatcherism and the consequences of a part of Margaret Thatcher's conservative politics. Thus, although the novel is set in the 1960s, it actually focuses on its contemporary social and political context, since the novel was published in 1988.

Margaret Thatcher was a great advocate of returning to what she called Victorian values, by which she meant a belief in the traditional family unit and the need for the individuals to take responsibility for their own economic and social well being. The paradoxical approach to social cohesion characteristic of Thatcher's government is perhaps best summed up in the famous phrase uttered by Margaret Thatcher herself during a 1987 interview, that there is 'no such thing as society,' only 'individuals and...families' (qtd. in Evans 1997: 115). Though there is nothing to suggest that *The Fifth Child* engages directly with this statement, the novel engages closely with the values expressed in it, in particular the implication that individuals and families are somehow antithetical to the notion of 'society'. *The Fifth Child* identifies the source of social decline precisely in the Thatcherite prioritization of the individual at the expense of society, and the related conception of the family home as an insular fortress, within which the individual is able to protect himself from the outside world.

The novel is overwhelmingly centered on the place of David and Harriet's domestic idyll – a fortress for 'that individuality of theirs' (29). In the opening chapter of the novel, we are told that when Harriet and David met, they both recognized something familiar in the other:

Conservative, old-fashioned, not to say obsolescent, timid,...they defended a stubbornly held view of themselves, which was that they were ordinary and in the right of it, should not be criticized for emotional fastidiousness, abstemiousness, just because these were unfashionable qualities. (Lessing 7)

The use of the word 'conservative' here suggests a fundamental traditionalism, rather than any specific political position, but the core values of the couple are, more importantly, positioned as defensive. They defend their normality and typicality in their adherence to family values during the 1960s (when the novel opens), a decade when such values were being challenged. When the novel commences, these values of a traditional Victorian family seem absurdly anachronistic. The couple feels similarly 'abstemious' about establishing their home in London:

Not possible to find the kind of house they wanted, for the life they wanted, in London. Anyway, they were not sure London was what they needed – no, it wasn't, they would prefer a smallish town with an atmosphere of its own. (Lessing 13)

*The Fifth Child* also reflects the fractured condition of English society. The novel explicitly comments on class segregation and the socio-economic insecurity in English

society, and insists that the problem comes from within. The middle class is obviously represented by Harriet and David whose idyllic vision disregards the impending insecurity and dissension characteristic of the rest of the world. They insist on 'guarding that stubborn individuality of theirs' despite the fact that outside 'beat and battered the storms of the world' and,

The easy good times had utterly gone. David's firm had been struck, and had not been given the promotion he expected; but others had lost their jobs and he was lucky...At the end of the road there was a telephone box that had been vandalized so often the authorities had given up: it stood unusable. (Lessing 29-30)

Continually gesturing both forwards and backwards in time, the Lovatts' home is uniquely placed to facilitate the novel's critique of both Victorian and contemporary society.

Margaret Thatcher's statement that 'there is no such thing as society' but, 'only individuals and families' appears contradictory if we place it against any definition of society, on the one hand. On the other hand, she constructs a cultural nationalism inherent in conservative political frameworks. As George Lakoff discussed at length in his 1996 book *Moral Politics*, this metaphorical understanding of the nation-as-family directly informs our political worldview. He asserts that the family serves as the central metaphor in conservative politics, uniting aspects of conservative thinking that appear contradictory, even paradoxical, from the outside. According to Lakoff, a great deal of conservative thought revolves around what he terms the 'strict father model' of the traditional (which is to say patriarchal) nuclear family. (Lakoff 1996: 191)

The Lovatts and their family life represent a perfect microcosm of Thatcher's isolationist nationalism. The oppositional relation between the family and society implied in Thatcher's statement is a critical point of contradiction and paradox at the very centre of her political consciousness, and it is no surprise to find it as the focus of Lessing's criticism in the novel. This binary opposition is crucial to the Lovatts' construction of their domestic fortress, and its ultimate erosion governs the novel's critique of Thatcherite values.

However, an examination of the ways in which the novel approaches this critique necessitates a discussion along the meanings of society. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides different definitions to the term: 'association with one's fellow men, especially in a friendly or intimate manner; companionship or fellowship'. In this sense, despite their 'stubbornly held view of themselves' (7), David and Harriet Lovatt look for the society of their family and friends, which on special family and religious occasions, forms an important component of their enjoyment of their home. Thus, the Lovatts' home becomes the place of numerous social events, enjoyable for hosts and guests alike: the guests enjoy themselves 'around the great family table, where so many chairs could be comfortably accommodated' (25), while David and Harriet take pleasure in welcoming their guests into their domestic idyll. Already, both semantically and ideologically, the binary opposition family-society implied in Thatcher's statement, appears to have been eroded. Society is a 'collection of individuals,' formally defined; the moment two or more individuals establish a relationship, the inevitable result, by definition, is a society. To say that there is no such thing as society is demonstrably false.

It is equally false to live inside one's own fantasy. Harriet and David want a traditional happy marriage, with a large number of children. They seem well on their way to achieving their dream, producing four children in six years. Then Harriet unexpectedly becomes pregnant with a child that, well before its birth, threatens the Lovatts' domestic happiness and announces serious interrogations of the 'real'.

The appearance of Ben constitutes an uncanny manifestation of the increasingly turbulent 'society' which the Lovatts have tried to push out of existence through the erection of their physical and psychological domestic boundaries. These boundaries are no use against Ben, precisely because he comes, physically, from within. The narrative's macro level allegory portrays England as increasingly separated into 'two peoples...not one – enemies, hating each other, who could not hear what the other said' (30). While one might be tempted to read such a passage in terms of Margaret Thatcher's xenophobia, since her deep suspicion of foreign influences was echoed in much of the British press, due in part to the enthusiastic surge of patriotic sentiment and 'unprecedentedly crass and distasteful xenophobia' (Evans 1997: 97), I think that, in the light of the subsequent unfolding of the narrative, we might agree with Vianu's observation: 'whatever we do not want to see, whatever we fear and reject is all inside us' (Vianu 1999: 59). In a similar vein, Ellen Pifer has observed that "while the Lovatts are busy securing their 'fortress' against these hostile outside forces, the 'enemy' invades from within" (Pifer 1989: 126).

From the beginning, Harriet's fifth pregnancy is atypical. The foetus is so combative that she fears it is 'trying to tear its way out of her stomach' (49). Feeling herself 'possessed' (50), she even imagines that she has inside her not a human foetus but an animal with hooves and claws that gashes her flesh.

The fifth child is born out of his mother's monstrous imagination. But throughout Lessing's narrative, the reader maintains an ambivalent view of the monster child's behaviour. Ben remains more or less silent in the text, and all commentaries about his deviance are made by the rest of his family (especially his mother), who, as the novel suggests at various points, is prejudiced against him. Ben's vitality is fantastic in the Todorovan sense. At birth, he hardly resembles a human infant. He looks more like a monster:

He had a heavy-shouldered hunched look, as if he were crouching there as he lay. His forehead sloped from his eyes to his crown. His hair grew in an unusual pattern from the double crown where started a wedge or triangle that came low on the forehead, the hair lying forward in thick yellowish stubble, while the side and back hair grew downwards. His hands were thick and heavy, with pads of muscles in the palms. (Lessing 60)

Lessing's novel can be considered an example of fantastic literature. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic creates hesitation in the reader, confronted by an 'irreducible opposition between real and unreal' in a text (Todorov 1973: 167). Ben's presence occasions this irreducibility, because it is impossible to conclude if he is the monster everybody says he is, or merely an embodiment of his mother's possession. Harriet's expectations from her last child, and her unreliable point of view, are the pillars of the narrative's fantastic quality.

One episode which highlights the indeterminacy of Harriet's narrative revolves around Ben's supposed killing of a friend's pet-dog (75-6). She immediately attributes the dog's death to Ben. Her meditation on Ben's supposed careful planning of the killing is doubtful, and she herself hesitates to believe her own conclusion.

Suddenly sick with suspicion, she rushed up to see if Ben was in his room: he was squatting on his bed, and when she came in, he looked up and laughed, but soundlessly, in his way, which was like a baring of the teeth. He had opened his door, gone quietly past his sleeping parents, down the stairs, found the dog, killed it, and gone back up again, quietly, into his room, and shut the door. (Lessing 75)

Ben's soundless laughter and his impulse of baring his teeth are assumed to be signs of deviance and monstrosity. This episode is, hence, highly suspenseful and the reader must decide either to believe Harriet's account, or consider her narrative unreliable.

Harriet further reinforces Ben's weirdness through the names she confers on him, names which verge on the fantastic, such as troll (61), goblin (61), Neanderthal (65), dwarf (68), changeling (72) and gnome (89). This proliferation of names reveals Harriet's inability to decide what her son is. His presence is so equivocal that his mother can only see him between two worlds.

Thus, by introducing a fantastic presence in a realistic narrative, Lessing finds her theme. Lillian R. Furst has demonstrated that the dilemma of realistic fiction is the negotiation between the fact that it is 'illusion' and the aim at 'eliciting belief in its truthfulness' (Furst 1995: 12). Thus, Ben's presence serves to disrupt the novel's focus, but, it also forbids any claims to realism. Lessing extends the fantastic to thematic concerns, beyond Todorov's idea that the fantastic, mainly addresses form.

Harriet's conviction that she has given birth to a 'changeling' is repeatedly dismissed by the medical world. Faced with evidence to the contrary, not a single doctor is willing to support the Lovatts conviction that Ben's behaviour is unusual. Harriet's 'old-fashioned' doctor concedes only that the child is 'hyperactive' (77). In fact, doctors more readily identify the problem as Harriet's, blaming Ben's deviant behaviour on her negative attitude towards him. Among other things, *The Fifth Child* explores the ways in which pressures to maintain cultural normalcy may directly invalidate and undermine the truth of the 'real' individual experience.

When David declares that the only solution is to place the monster child in an institution, despite the doctor's judgment that their fifth child is 'normal', David concludes that 'He may be normal for what he is. But he is not normal for what we are' (79). Here again the reader may hesitate about who is abnormal: Ben or his parents.

Although the reader necessarily shares Harriet's fear of Ben and her inability to define him as human, as a consequence of what Collins and Wilson term 'genre-boundary trespass' (Collins and Wilson 1994: 281), and the clever use of narrative perspective, identification with Harriet is only partial. Readers are encouraged to reach beyond surface meanings and construct allegorical ones, but the text then deconstructs those allegories so that 'the novel actually undermines its own legitimizing narratives' (Collins and Wilson 1994: 289). Although the narration is in the third person, the point of view is closely, but not exclusively, aligned with Harriet's. Throughout the text we see the explanations that various characters offer for Ben's difference as ultimately limited.

If we prematurely repudiate Harriet's response to Ben, then we may end up refusing to admit that we might share her fear of difference. Harriet's decision to rescue Ben from the institution where he has been incarcerated demonstrates that she is unable to expel Ben from the family, from the world of human. When she decides to take him home, she thinks that 'he looked more ordinary than she had ever seen him' (100). Bringing Ben back to the family, Harriet takes his place as scapegoat and endures the resentment and blame of her husband and children. This mobility of the figure of the 'other' within the family constructs a more complex critique of family values than is acknowledged if we interpret the novel as simply racist in its depiction of Ben.

Depriving 'becoming' of any immanent end, the concept, in Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation means a way of understanding transformative possibilities. Becoming is never finalized, but always in process.

Becoming animal, suggest Deleuze and Guattari in their reading of Kafka, should not be interpreted literally. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor does not become an insect. He remains a man who is becoming an insect. Becoming animal for Kafka implies a degrading of the

human, a continuing metamorphosis. 'Every child does this, constructs and tests these lines of escape, these animal-becomings...Animal-becomings are absolute deterritorializations...To become animal is to make the movement, the escape, to escape in all its positiveness, to cross the threshold and reach a continuum of intensities which no longer have any value except from themselves' (Deleuze and Guattari 23-4).

By writing in a displaced or deterritorialized language, Lessing continually interrogates the 'real' from different points of view: Harriet's doctors perceive Ben as 'within the range of normality', and the other Lovatts perceive him as not-quite-human. Harriet, torn between these mutually exclusive positions, finds herself divided and wonders whether Ben is a punishment for her naïve belief that individuals can dictate the terms of their domestic happiness. Thus, Ben catalyzes questions about boundaries and limits, including moral and social questions as to the normality, family life and maternal responsibility.

Harriet's decision to rescue Ben produces the ultimate collapse of her family. Her longed-for dream of domestic happiness has led to her other children leaving home in protest, David withdrawing into his political life, and the Lovatts' house being put up for sale. When Ben reaches adolescence, he becomes a criminal. But the narrative remains vague about his aberrant behaviour, refusing to clearly state the nature of his crimes. His friendships and adventures with the delinquent John and his gang of social misfits are episodes the text clearly relates; however, despite his striking appearance,

Everyone in authority had *not* been seeing Ben ever since he was born...When she saw him on television in the crowd, he had worn a jacket with its collar up, and a scarf...He seemed a stout schoolboy. Had he put on those clothes to disguise himself? Did that mean that he knew how he looked? How did he see himself? (Lessing 157)

The fact that the authorities (the law, and more often, the medical establishment) do not see Ben indicates a refusal to acknowledge entities which they cannot name or classify. Throughout her career, Lessing has been intensely sceptical of institutional solutions to human problems, particularly the problem of dealing with difference. This is again Lessing's attack on rational explanations and strict classifications into sanity or insanity, which she extends now to another pair of oppositions human/animal. Ben's ambiguity defies any rational explanation, and hence, he remains invisible to science. Furthermore, the fact that Harriet is watching Ben on television is significant. Having failed to 'see' him clearly all his life, Ben becomes, in the end, a mere televised image – a mere sign. His reality is mediated by a screen, which is as unreliable as Lessing's narrative. Harriet wonders if Ben can see himself. She may not be able to see him herself. Harriet's role has been that of a caretaker and, in the end of a spectator, not of a loving mother. Ben is denied any family. The idea or ideal of domestic happiness also becomes impossible in *The Fifth Child*. Lessing shatters our faith in safe homes. Harriet and David Lovatt's fantasy of a happy household and extended family that they believe will keep the violence of their society at bay has become a breeding ground for it. The narrative points the finger of blame at the Lovatts, who were unable to deal with a monstrous child; it criticizes society for its rigid conventions and norms which lead to 'extreme cultural purism that breeds monsters who feed on violence' (Stanescu 2011: 98).

Directly interrogating the 'real' from several angles, Lessing refuses to offer her readers a single answer. The end of *The Fifth Child* is uncertain. It is an open question as to the fate of violence in our society, as to the family as the site of its origin, its capacity to cope with difference, and ultimately our propensity for judging, classifying and giving verdicts on the basis of dual thinking.

Her healing prescription entails a shift in focus, a widening of our perceptual gaze to include the kinds of knowledge pushed to the periphery of human understanding, beyond dualisms that lie at the foundations of Western epistemology and moral thought. She

repeatedly demonstrates that dichotomies (the sources of wars and violence) have disastrous effects. In a Deleuzian scheme, she envisions an epistemological/ontological process by which one can elude the metaphysical logic of dichotomous thought. She subverts the either/or logic, and proposes instead another one, based on “and, and, and”, which is a logic of multiplicity. Her heroes are sane and insane, human and animal, candid and violent; what differs is our perception of them as they are.

Lessing’s dystopian vision of contemporary society becomes an exploration of the limitations of realism by focusing on areas of human experience that it cannot easily convey, because certainties no longer exist. This has instigated her experimental realism, which combines such diverse forms as fantasy, apocalypse and myth. In *The Fifth Child*, which refuses to be prescriptive and always leaves the readers the option to avoid what they can only guess at, the child is not an answer or revelation. It is a postmodern ghost-like child who enables Lessing to problematize the reliability of the real in the context of vulnerable social institutions and values.

The text retains that openness of meaning which is such an important feature of Lessing’s novels. For it is a closed system – political or ideological – which her fiction most consistently attacks.

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