

## *TWO YEARS WITHOUT DORIS LESSING*

**Alina Vișan**

**Assist. Prof., PhD, "Eftimie Murgu" University of Reșița**

*Abstract: This paper will present Doris Lessing's biography and a brief description of her career. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of November 2015 there will be two years since she passed away and I think it is high time for us to remember one of the greatest women writers in the English literature and one of the most fascinating women ever, whose life can definitely be turned into a novel or a film.*

*Keywords: love, feminism, Sufi, inner novels.*

### **1. Biography**

Doris May Tayler was born on October 22, 1919 of British parents. Her father, Alfred Taylor, was a clerk in the Imperial Bank of Persia and during the World War I he had been crippled and the nurse who took care of him, Emily, soon became his wife. The family moved to the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1925 in the hope of becoming rich through maize farming. Her mother adapted to the rough new life and she tried to reproduce a civilized life among savages but her father did not adapt to this new life and thus, the farm did not bring the promised wealth.

Doris Lessing often told the reporters that her childhood was "an uneven mix of some pleasure and much pain"<sup>1</sup>. She and her brother, Harry, explored the magnificent natural world which later will be the background of many of her novels. Her mother was obsessed with raising a proper daughter and she sent Doris in a convent school where nuns terrified their charges with stories of hell and damnation. Then, Doris was sent to an all-girls high school in the capital of Salisbury but at the age of thirteen she dropped out of this school and this represented the end of her formal education. But Doris Lessing became a self-educated intellectual like other southern African women writers, such as Olive Schreiner and Nadine Gordimer. She recently commented that "unhappy childhoods seem to produce fiction writers". The books she read lay out worlds to escape into. She read everything she could get from

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dorislessing.org/biography.html>

Dickens, Scott, Stevenson to D.H. Lawrence, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky. Her early years were spent listening to her father's bitter memories of World War I which have marked her. "We are all of us made by war," Lessing has written, "twisted and warped by war, but we seem to forget it."<sup>2</sup>

Trying to escape from her rigid mother, she left home at fifteen and worked as a nursemaid. Her employer gave her books on politics and sociology to read and during this period, she was also writing stories, and sold two of them to magazines in South Africa. Doris Lessing was a modern woman who fought against the biological and cultural imperatives that fated her to sink without a murmur into marriage and motherhood. "There is a whole generation of women," she has said, speaking of her mother's era, "and it was as if their lives came to a stop when they had children. Most of them got pretty neurotic - because, I think, of the contrast between what they were taught at school they were capable of being and what actually happened to them." Lessing believes that she was freer than most people because she became a writer. For her, writing is a process of "setting at a distance," taking the "raw, the individual, the uncriticized, the unexamined, into the realm of the general."<sup>3</sup>

In 1937 she moved to Salisbury, where she worked as a telephone operator for a year. At nineteen, she married Frank Wisdom, and had two children. A few years later, she left her family, remaining in Salisbury and soon she joined the Left Book Club a group of Communists where Gottfried Lessing was a leading member of the group; shortly after she joined, they married and had a son.

In 1949 she moved to England and divorced Gottfried Lessing who returned to Germany. He was East German Ambassador to Uganda. He and his third wife were killed during the riots against [Idi Amin's](#) rule in 1979, in [Kampala](#), Uganda.

Arrived in England, Doris Lessing begins her literary career by publishing *The Grass Is Singing* (1950). She had several lovers, but she never married again.

[She died](#) on November 17, 2013. Her younger son, Peter, whom she cared for through years of illness, died three weeks before her.

On 21 August 2015 a five-volume secret file on Lessing built up by the branches of British Secret Service, [MI5](#) and [MI6](#), was made public and placed in [The National Archives \(United Kingdom\)](#). The file, which contains documents that are redacted in parts, shows

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dorislessing.org/biography.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dorislessing.org/biography.html>

Lessing was under surveillance by British spies for around twenty years, from early 1940s onwards. Her associations with Communism and her anti-racism activism are reported to be the reasons for the secret service interest in Lessing<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. Literary career

Lessing became increasingly disillusioned with the Communist movement, which she left altogether in 1954. By 1949, Lessing had moved to London with her young son. That year, she also published her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, and began her career as a professional writer.

I consider that there are five important stages in Doris Lessing's literary career: the African novels, the sex war novels, the Sufi novels, autobiographical novels and inner space novels.

The African novels are represented by *The Grass Is Singing* and the sequence *Children of Violence*.

*The Grass is Singing* (1950), the novel Doris Lessing made her debut as a novelist with, examines the relationship between a white farmer's wife and her black servant. The book is both a tragedy based in love-hatred and a study of unbridgeable racial conflicts presenting the relationship from the white settlers' point of view.

The sex war novel is represented by her most daring novel, *The Golden Notebook*. On the whole, the novel is a minute dissection of the men-women relationship from a woman's point of view and therefore the label of feminism tagged to the novelist in spite of the fact that she never considered it such a book.

Doris Lessing's third period of creation is the Sufi period, due to the fact that it was greatly influenced by the Sufism, a religious-philosophical trend which was brought to the Western world by Idries Shah, whose writings on Sufi mysticism stress the evolution of consciousness and the belief that individual liberation can come about only if people understand the link between their own fates and the fate of society. Novels written under the influence of Sufism are *The Golden Notebook*, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*.

Although written before Doris Lessing encountered Sufism, *The Golden Notebook* is considered by the writer herself as being her "most Sufi book".

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-34014752>

*The Memoirs of a Survivor* analyses a middle-aged woman who becomes the guardian of a little girl, Emily. The novel is about Emily's personal growth and the guardian's help in this process. The guardian, who remains unnamed, passes through the wall into Emily's inner world, where she finds chaos and tries to make order out of it.

Another Sufi novel is *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* where Janna Somers is the narrator of the story and she becomes close to an old "witch", Maudie Fowler who tells Sufi inspired anecdotes and stories about the spirit of Nasreddin Hodja, a character in the Sufi tales. We have to admit a great resemblance between Maudie and Nasreddin which cannot be coincidental.

The autobiographical elements of her novels have always been hunted by readers, critics and reviewers and they have always haunted her creation. Doris Lessing herself was much annoyed when hearing the omnipresent question: *is this an autobiographical novel?* The sequence *Children of Violence* (1951-1959) contains five novels: *Martha Quest*, *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, *Landlocked* and *The Four-Gated City*. The first three novels are deeply autobiographical.

The novel *Martha Quest* contains many autobiographical elements and there are several resemblances between Martha, Doris Lessing and their families. The second novel in *Children of Violence*, i.e. *A Proper Marriage*, where the main topic is the relationship between love and marriage. There are common elements both in Doris and Frank Wisdom's marriage, as well as in Martha and Douglas Knowell's one. The novel *A Ripple from the Storm* analyses Martha's political involvement which is very similar to Doris Lessing's political life and the relationship between Martha and Anton copies the one of Doris and Gottfried Lessing.

The inner space novels are *The Summer Before the Dark*, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. They are concerned most and mostly with the heroes' inner space, but the characters live their inner journeys in totally different ways.

For example, Kate Brown, in *The Summer Before the Dark*, is a heroine that undertakes an inner and outer journey. The outer journey is illustrated by the activities connected to her new job and the journey to Spain with her younger lover, Jeffrey, while the inner journey is represented by self-analysis and the descent into deepest selves and into madness. The inner journey is shaped by a series of seven dreams in which Kate is trying to save a seal and take it to the sea. The seal represents Kate's private self which must be recovered from the hidden state in which it has existed during her years as a wife and mother.

A novel that has for the first and the only time a male protagonist is *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, where Charles Watkins is Lessing's most "schizophrenic" character, an illustration of the parallel that can be drawn between life experience and R.D.Laing's existential phenomenology of schizophrenia. The stresses of middle age and personal problems have propelled Charles Watkins, a professor of classics at Cambridge, into a mental breakdown accompanied by a temporary loss of identity medically described as amnesia. His being is split into two modes: while his body participates in one, his mind participates in the other; they are complementary and, much of the time, mutually exclusive. This novel is reminiscent of a case that R.D.Laing once had. R.D.Laing, a famous psychiatrist of the time, did more to challenge our understanding of the human psyche than anyone else since Freud, and on the other hand, Doris Lessing who has contributed to changing the way we see the world since she was often the first to speak about what no one else did.

The third inner space novel, published in 1974, is *The Memoirs of a Survivor* which consistently uses illusion as if it were reality. In this novel, "an attempt at autobiography", as the author says, the inner and outer space is revealed in Emily, a child, a personification of the narrator who leaps into the fantastic through rules made from a ground of cruel reality. The realm of magic is a place behind the narrator's living room wall to which she can sometimes retreat, but from her windows the storyteller watches things fall apart.

Lessing's other novels include *The Good Terrorist* (1985) and *The Fifth Child* (1988); she also published two novels under the pseudonym Jane Somers (*The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, 1983 and *If the Old Could...*, 1984). In addition, she has written several nonfiction works, including books about cats, a love since childhood. Also in 1995, she visited South Africa to see her daughter and grandchildren, and to promote her autobiography. It was her first visit since being forcibly removed in 1956 for her political views. Ironically, she is welcomed now as a writer acclaimed for the very topics for which she was banished 40 years ago.

Volume one of her autobiography titled *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* appeared in 1995.

*Going Home* and *In Pursuit of the English* were republished in 1996. These two fascinating and important books give rare insight into Doris Lessing's personality, life and views.

In 1996, her first novel in 7 years, [Love Again](#), was published. She did not make any personal appearances to promote the book.

The same year there were published [Play with A Tiger and Other Plays](#), a compilation of 3 of her plays: [Play with a Tiger](#), [The Singing Door](#) and [Each His Own Wilderness](#).

She has also written some science fiction novels [The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five](#)" and [Canopus in Argos: Archives](#), 1979-1983).

[Walking in the Shade](#), the second volume of her autobiography was published in October and was nominated for the 1997 National Book Critics Circle Award in the biography/autobiography category. This volume starts with her arrival in England in 1949 and presents her life up to the publication of [The Golden Notebook](#). This is the final volume of her autobiography, she declared that she would not be writing a third volume.

Her novel, titled ["Mara and Dann"](#), has been published in 1999.

[Ben, in the World](#), the sequel to [The Fifth Child](#) was published in 2000.

Her final novel was [Alfred and Emily](#), a book about her parents.

### 3. Prizes

[Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949](#) appeared in 1995 and received the [James Tait Black Prize](#) for best biography. In June 1995 she received an Honorary Degree from [Harvard University](#).

In May 1999 she was presented with the XI Annual International Catalunya Award, an award by the government of Catalunya.

In 1999, Doris Lessing was appointed a *Companion of Honour*, an exclusive order for those who have done "conspicuous national service." The list was selected by the Labor Party government to honor people in all walks of life for their contributions to their professions and to charity. It was officially bestowed by Queen Elizabeth II.

In 2001 she was awarded the Prince of Asturias Prize in Literature, one of Spain's most important distinctions, for her brilliant literary works in defense of freedom and Third World causes. She also received the David Cohen British Literature Prize.

She was on the shortlist for the first [Man Booker International Prize](#) in 2005.

In 2007 she was awarded the [Nobel Prize for Literature](#) and she became its oldest winner at the age of 88.

**4. References:**

1. Ahmed, Saladdin, 2008, **What is Sufism?** *Forum Philosophicum*, 13, Canada: Brock University,
2. Bloom, H. , 1986, **Doris Lessing** , Chelsea House
3. Draine, Betsy, 1983, **Substance Under Pressure**, The University of Wisconsin Press
4. Galin, Müge, 1997, **Between East and West – Sufism in the Novels of Doris Lessing**, New York: State University of New York Press
5. Gardiner Kegan, Judith, 1989, **Rhys, Stead, Lessing and the Politics of Empathy**, Indiana University Press
6. <http://www.dorislessing.org/>
7. <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-34014752>
8. **Kaplan**, C. and others, 1988, **Doris Lessing: The Alchemy of Survival**, Ohio University Press
9. Klein, Carole, 2000, **Doris Lessing – A Biography**- London: Duckworth,
10. Maslen, Elizabeth, 1994, **Doris Lessing**, Plymouth: Northcote House
11. Rowe, Margaret Moan, 1994, **Doris Lessing** – London: The Macmillan Press LTD
12. Sprague, Claire, 1987, **Rereading Doris Lessing –Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition**, The University of North Carolina
13. Stanford, Peter - Doris Lessing: A mother much misunderstood, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10467963/Doris-Lessing-A-mother-much-misunderstood.html>
14. Watkins, Susan, 2006, **“Grande Dame” or “New Woman: Doris Lessing and the Palimpsest**, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Nr. 17, London: Routledge
15. Whittaker, Ruth, 1993, **Doris Lessing**, London: Palgrave-Macmillan