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*Trauma of War as a Paradigmatic Discourse in Doris Lessing's  
Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage*

[PP: 182-189]

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**Abstract**

Doris Lessing's novels reveal the way in which war affects humanity by capturing the traumatic state of the author herself and also of the characters in her works. As a result of the two world wars, in the twentieth century, trauma emerges as a paradigmatic discourse for defining its catastrophic, disastrous and injurious aftermaths. In the novels *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*, the author shows how the war is an extremely traumatic experience for those who are direct witness to its violence and how it wreaks havoc on the entire generation. In *A Proper Marriage*, there is no particular mention of any catastrophic effects of war. The novel vividly portrays the anxiety which people suffer before a war. The catastrophe of the World War-I aggravates the impact of the forthcoming World War-II. Hasty marriages and pregnancies are manipulated as the ways to escape the trauma of the impending war. Such discourse of trauma of wars, with its vivid catastrophic and disastrous effects on the people, narrated in the *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*, forms the topics of investigation and discussion in the present paper. The paper also explores and discusses how scientific war accelerated the destruction of the youth without coming to their aid. Attempt has also been made to shed light upon various techniques of escapism used by the characters to survive in the chaotic world.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing's Novels, Paradigmatic Discourse, Stress Disorder, Martha Quest, Trauma of war, escapism

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## 1. Introduction

War scars humanity in ways we refuse to recognize. After the Second World War the world sat up, licked its wounds ineffectually, and started to prepare for the Third World War. (as cited in Ingersoll, 1994, p. 26).

The above is an interview statement by Doris Lessing given to Jonah Raskin in 1969, the year in which the last novel of the *Children of Violence* series *The Four Gated City* was published. The statement is enough to reveal the larger backdrop of her novels and the way in which war affects humanity by capturing the traumatic state of the author herself and also of the characters in her works. The statement also sets the purpose of the artist. It is to reflect the so far unrecognized ways war scars humanity in order to shock them into awareness and a sense of responsibility.

War is an organized and often prolonged conflict that is carried out by states or non-state actors. It is characterized by extreme violence, social disruption, and economic destruction. War should be understood as an actual, intentional and widespread armed conflict between political communities. Margaret Mead sees war not as a natural instinct, but rather as a mere social invention like writing, marriage etc. People will go to war if they have the invention. Just as people who have the custom of dueling will duel and those who do not know of dueling will not fight duels (as cited in Mueller, 1991, p. 19). War is not something that is somehow required by the human psyche or by the human condition, or by the forces of history. Nevertheless war has been an important historical phenomenon. According to the theory of war, it is the instinct of violence, and greed, which indulges man to use force on other man. There are different definitions of war by different scholars as noted by Alexander Moseley (2002) in his book *A Philosophy of War*. Cicero defines war broadly as, “a contention by force”. For Thomas Hobbes war is an attitude and for Denis Diderot, war is “a convulsive and violent disease of the body politics”. Modern writer like Parsons sees propaganda as violence in war. The main idea that we draw from the different definitions of war is that war is a state of organized, open-ended, collective conflict (as cited in Moseley, 2002, p. 19). Thus, we see that according to Alexander Moseley (2002), war “always involves some form of organization and it must be considered to involve a condition rather than the existence of violence – for sometimes wars involve no battles or clashes of arms” (p.19).

## 2. Background to the Study

### 2.1 Doris Lessing: A brief biographical note

Doris May Tayler was born in Kermanshah, Persia, on 22 October 1919 and died on 17 November 2013 in London. Her father, Alfred Cook Tayler, had gone to work for the Imperial Bank of Persia after being invalided out of World War I with a wounded leg. Her mother, Emily Maude McVeagh Tayler, met her husband while nursing him after his amputation. In 1924 the Taylers moved to a large farm in Southern Rhodesia, looking for a brighter financial future and better education for their children, Doris and her younger brother, Harry. However, Alfred Tayler's attempts at farming were unsuccessful, so the family struggled with poverty for at least twenty years in an isolated area in the district of Banket, one hundred miles west of Mozambique. Doris was educated first at a convent school and then at a government school for girls, both in the capital city of Salisbury. She returned home at about age twelve because of recurrent eye troubles and received no further formal education. She held a variety of jobs- nursemaid, telephone operator, chauffeur, and the stenographer. Lessing's life abruptly changed when she returned to Salisbury and intensely involved herself with a radical group of young people inspired by the ideologies of communism and who wanted to bring an end to the colour bar in Africa. Her involvement

with this group was a turning point in her life as this led her to a marriage with a civil servant in Salisbury Frank Wisdom in 1939. They had two children, Jean and John, who remained with their father when the parents divorced in 1943. In 1945 she remarried a German exile named Gottfried Lessing, who was an active communist in Rhodesia during the war. When this marriage also failed, she left Africa with her son Peter from second marriage and landed on her England in 1949 to begin her career as a writer with the manuscript of *The Grass is Singing*.

### 2.2 Recurrent themes in her works

Violence and trauma has been a timeless theme in literature. One can easily and almost certainly justify a study of violence in the novels of Doris Lessing on the basis of its literary value, social usefulness and contemporary appeal. Trauma as envisaged by Lessing is remarkably different from the common notion of it. A close study of her works reveals that her obsession with trauma and violence is her desire to affirm life and existence amidst general lifelessness. The author, after witnessing two world wars and the cruelties of the war, one through her parents and second herself, had come to realize that violence is undoubtedly the biggest problem confronted by today's world. It has infiltrated into the very fabric of our society which we can no longer afford to ignore. It is in this context that Doris Lessing's contributions have become relevant. She dared to deal with the reality of violence through her writings when most of her contemporaries were afraid to approach the subject due to its dangerous potentiality.

### 3. Discourse of Trauma of War, with its Consequences, in Lessing's Novels

As a result of the two world wars in the twentieth century, trauma emerges as a paradigmatic discourse for defining its catastrophic, disastrous and injurious aftermaths. The traumatic has also become a metaphor for characterizing the people who are either direct victim or indirect victims of war. The victims of war suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder which is characterized by two dimensions of symptoms: firstly intrusion which includes nightmares, startle reaction, hyper-vigilance and insomnia, and secondly avoidance, which is characterized by social withdrawal, low interest, poor concentration, and avoidance of past memories. Hallucinations, schizophrenia and delusions are symptoms of psychosis and can make a person act in inappropriate and unpredictable ways if left untreated. However, not all people, who exhibit psychotic symptoms, have schizophrenia (Pollett 2006, p. 4). One of the most common results of victims of violence is mental illness which is experienced at individual, social and at large at the level of humanity. With such background, the paper explores how in the first novel, *Martha Quest* and in the second novel, *A Proper Marriage* of the series *Children of Violence* the author depicts the troubles of people after war and even before the war starts.

#### 3.1 Trauma as an Aftermath of War in *Martha Quest*

*Children of Violence* series starts with *Martha Quest*, which introduces Martha's parents as the victims of World War-I, like the parents of the author Doris Lessing which she reported in an interview as- "I have always observed incredible brutality on society. My parents' lives and the lives of millions of people were ruined by the First World War. . ." (as cited in Ingersoll, 1994, P. 26). In the novel, we find that Mr. Quest's personality is strongly shaped by his experiences in World War-I. The war traumatizes him and makes him passive to everything around him. In World War-I, he served as an ordinary soldier and saw the battle fields and flying shells which killed his friends. He also injured himself and met his future wife in a hospital where he was taken. Throughout the text, Lessing flashes hints at the sufferings of impaired Mr. Quest. Through him, she depicts the violence that is unmentionable and violence that the author chooses not to mention, but subtly hints at. Lessing (2001) ironically calls war "Great Unmentionable" (p. 34); yet presents war a

compulsive topic for a war victim. Mr. Quest has obsession with war. He adopts a passive attitude and gains a liking for suffering. He keeps muttering, to himself, the memories of war—“We were out in no man’s land, six of us, when the star shells went up, and we saw we weren’t three paces from the Boche trenches and . . .” (Lessing, 2001, p.33). It is a cathartic act for the traumatized narrator that gives him a way to survive. The following excerpt from Emil’s presentation which McKinney (2007) used in his article conveys the state of people who are not listened:

It is important to get back to the story of the survivor. It must be told to be integrated. . . . It is very important to listen. Mourning, grief, and loss are all part of recovery and without integration, healing is impossible. We need to encourage and incorporate healing, mourning, grief, and loss. Each person has an internal need to be heard and to tell his story. . . . Ignoring significant aspects of a client’s trauma is hurtful and disrespectful. (p. 273-74).

Mr. Quest, with his harrowing war memories, passionately calls it, “*my war*” ( p. 47). And, if he notices a reluctance, on the part of the listener, he ends the conversation with a warning, “Your time’ll come, and then I can say I told you so” ( p. 47). Even after the war is over long time ago, he still identifies himself with the war. His war experience fundamentally changes his sense of identity. Nigel C. Hunt (2010) writes in his book *Memory, War and Trauma* when he says that many soldiers start identifying themselves with the armed forces, in which they lived then, with the family of which they are a part now. And this is what happens in the case of Mr. Quest, who, in spite of living with his family, remains lost in the memory of war and keeps on narrating and recalling the incidents of war. This act, of telling the story, is a cathartic act for the traumatized narrator and it gave him a way to survival. But on the other hand, her father’s traumatic mutterings also influence Martha in a negative way. She doesn’t understand the meaning of these words, “She was afraid because of the power of these words, which affected her so strongly” (p. 34).

Martha’s mother is not a direct victim of war but she too suffers from trauma by living with, and caring for, the traumatic husband. Her impatience towards Martha may owe itself to her affected relationship with her husband. This is the only reason why she is always in revolt with Martha. “Thoughts of Martha always filled her with such violent and supplicating and angry emotions that she could not sustain them . . .” (p.77). Thus, we see that war is an extremely traumatic experience not only for those who are a direct witness to its violence but war also wreaks havoc on the entire generation. Throughout the novel, there is a dragging feeling of being the survivors of unfortunate circumstances caused by great human devastation. War reverberates through the mind of its survivors, that is, Mr. and Mrs. Quest, as Doris Lessing reported it-

Everything is cracking up. . . . It had been falling apart since the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. She states further: I feel as if the Bomb has gone off inside myself, and in people around me. That’s what I mean by the cracking up. It’s as if the structure of the mind is being battered from inside. Some terrible thing is happening. (as cited in Bloom, 1986, p. 78).

### 3.2 Trauma as an Anxiety before War in *A Proper Marriage*

Second novel, *A Proper Marriage*, is unique in that though there is no particular mention of the affects of war, the novel vividly portrays the anxiety which people suffer before a war. The catastrophe of the World War-I aggravates the impact of the forth coming World War-II. As the effect of the unleashed violence of the upcoming Second World War, the young people are presented in utter restlessness. Hasty marriages and pregnancies are the ways to escape the trauma of impending war. Martha accepts, “I got married because there’s going to be war . . .” (Lessing, 1993, p. 80). Martha’s cause is only a representative of her

generation. In fact, preoccupations of every young man “was to get married to be doomed as quickly as possible” (p. 92). The trauma haunts them all the time and they can be seen awaiting it as well, clearly struggling to escape it through various ways. There is a clear obsessive epicurean behavior as if they wanted to drink life to the lees before war breaks out and death checkmates them as Lessing (1993) writes:

. . . night after night youth danced and sang itself into a condition of preparation for it [war]. Their days and work, their loves and love-making, were nothing but a preparation for that moment when hundreds of them stamped and shouted in great circles to the thudding drums, felt less as sound than as their own pulses; this was the culmination of the day, the real meaning of it, the moment of surrender. (p. 91)

If *Martha's Quest* is an illustration of the trauma of war, after it is over; *A Proper Marriage* is a depiction of how the harrowing memories of the war make the impending war traumatic. Lessing's (1993) sarcasm is evident in the way people are shown as mentally preparing themselves to face the collective violence:

. . . that before it was decided what the war was to be fought about. They were all longing to be swallowed up in something bigger than themselves; they were, in fact, already swallowed up. And since each war, before it starts, has the look of the last one . . . the entire gathering to become transformed into a congregation of self-dedicated worshippers of what their parents chose to remember of 1914. (p. 91).

The novel, thus, serves as a testimony to how the trauma of extreme violence is passed on to the next generation and may not just confine itself to the one who has directly experienced it. The older generation suffers from the ‘Post World War-I effects’ as the parents suffering from the trauma seem to transfer their frustration on their children. “When inappropriate behaviours are modelled for young children . . . these patterns of interaction can become entrenched and will be replicated in other social interactions” (Cunningham, 1998, p. ii). Thus, the children of traumatic and frustrated victims of World War-I pass on their burden on their own children. The burden of destruction of the previous war makes Stella assert on one occasion, “it was criminal to have a baby when war was starting . . .” (p.121). The word ‘criminal’ implies the deeply agonizing invisible scars that war’s destruction inflicts on the next generation who do not even participate in it. This shows how even the thought of war affects the natural impulses and processes. Stella’s opinion points out the duality of response to the upcoming large scale destruction of the World War-II. Stella is suggesting non-pregnancy as a better way to face the crises, whereas on the other hand, we find, in the novel, an unexpected increase in deliveries reported by the nurse to Martha- “Well, we’re so full – it’s the war. There’s a crop of babies suddenly that took us all by surprise” (p.187). Lessing’s ironic mode continues further when war is disassociated from any sentiment of patriotism. Air Force personnel’s arrival brings with them, “an atmosphere of dedication to danger, of reckless exuberance” (p.221). Here again Lessing’s (1993) comments are appropriate:

If the note of the First World War was idealistic dedication, succeeded by its mirror image, sarcastic anger . . . the symbol . . . of the Second World War was a cynical young airman sprouting aggressive but flippant moustaches capable of the most appalling heroism, but prone to surprising lapses into self-pitying but stoic despair, during which moments he would say he hoped he would be killed. . . . (p. 222).

Lessing’s use of phrases like “dedication to danger”, “reckless exuberance”, “appalling heroism”, “stoic despair” etc. are indicative of the paradoxical responses of the people

towards the upcoming war. Doris Lessing, who herself has been, in a way, the victim of two world wars aptly reports, "The First World War degraded and demoralized us terribly and the Second World War did it more thoroughly . . ." (as cited in Ingersoll, 1994, p. 54). War turns boys into men. In *A Proper Marriage*, Douglas returns from war because of his ulcer. But instead of being happy and relieved, Martha sinks into great dislike for a person who is her husband. She wants him to be a boy whom she had married. Her frustration seems to be clear- "The condition of being a women in wartime, she thought angrily, was that one should love not a man in relation to other men . . . and it was precisely this thing, dangerous, and attractive, which fed the intoxication of war, heightened the pulse, and drugged them all into losing their heads" (pp. 310-11).

#### 4. Conclusion

Lessing belongs to that generation of writers who had witnessed mammoth devastation and suffered immensely the aftermaths of World Wars. Therefore projection of violence and resultant trauma is a dominant discursive pattern in her works. Besides delineating physical aspects of wide scale violence, Lessing has also focused on the complexity of the psychological dimensions of violence and trauma in her works. *A Proper Marriage* highlights the bitter truth about how infidelity and extra-marital love affairs were sought as a means of survival by the people. Here people are freely engaging in extra-marital relations to overcome the anxiety of the upcoming war. All this subtly hint at the frustration suffered in romance by the survivors of war. Here Lessing shows how sex is used as an escapist mode by her characters to survive in a chaotic world. She shows lack of fulfillment suffered by people and because of which they search for different modes of survival. Explosions of war tear the beds of the lovers too. Here Lessing shows how the war shattered husbands used women to overcome their frustrating experiences in war. War leads to the breeding promiscuity in marital relations as well. Doris Lessing on being asked about her idea about the prevalent catastrophe of the world tells Brian Aldiss in an interview in 1988:

Well, look at what the human race has survived. I mean, our history is catastrophe. *We have survived*. We were born out of an ice age. We have survived earthquakes and famines and the Black Death, and we will doubtless survive AIDS. In some way or other, we seem to stagger through-of course, through catastrophes that are always unnecessary. . . . We're *living* in catastrophes: how many people die of hunger every year, how many children die? There are thirty wars going on at this very moment. Because they're not the big wars, we seem to pretend that they're not important. We're poisoning our seas, and our water supply-we all know this-our trees are dying in various parts of the world. This is a state of catastrophe. We're not very bright as animals yet, are we? (as cited in Ingersoll, 1994, pp. 172-73).

This point of view of Doris Lessing is well supported by Frondizi who asserts that, "[War] does not exist; what exists are wars, in the plural, ranging from tribal skirmishes to World War-II" (as cited in Moseley, 2002, p. 16). And it is the existence of these wars in our daily life which adds to the trauma and miseries of our life.

Lessing shows passivity to everything as a symptom of trauma. This she does through the character of Mr. Quest, who in the novel is shown as passive to the world around him. In her works we find that Lessing rarely talks about the physical injuries; physical losses appear more as journalistic reportage. What she concentrates upon is the mental state of people. Lessing also hints at the fact that people are developing a new kind of brotherhood out of the chaos of war. The sufferings and trauma of others mirror their own. Lessing also shows how war affects man woman relationships. War has disoriented social institution of marriage. The novels of Lessing project a traumatic generation of young people who exhibit signs of trauma

in their preparation of war by resorting to hasty marriages and equally hasty pregnancy. She perceives their trauma in their sleeplessness and late night club activities. This young generation gropes for escapist alternatives to drown their anxiety. Thus, we can conclude that wars in Europe bring a permanent shadow to Lessing's vision which she reflects in her novels. The texts of both the volumes provide a deep reflection of the concept of trauma suffered by her characters due to the prevalent violent environment.

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