The Inactivity of the Heroine in Doris Lessing's Martha Quest

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Abstract

The paper studies the inactivity of the central character of Doris Lessing's novel *Martha Quest* (1952) which is Vol.1 in a five-volume series entitled *Children of Violence* (1952-69). The text is set in one of the British colonies in Southern Africa called Rhodesia. The paper attempts to analyse the character of Martha Quest who is an adolescent at fifteen at the beginning of the novel, and it deals with her rebellion against her mother and the inferior role Mrs. Quest stands for as a wife and a mother. It is significant to mention that the heroine rejected this end for women believing that they can achieve greater than this inferior role. Moreover, the paper tackles the experience of Martha in the Sports Club which prevents marriage, but allows public sexual practices, and which appears to be only a miniature to the very social and political systems she rebels against like colonisation and racial discrimination. It shows how Martha does not compromise her intelligence and beauty, and how she fails to make all her dreams come true. The heroine's rebellion against her mother's conventionality and protection ended in a way that lets down her feminist fans for she copies her mother's lifestyle, i.e., Martha's marriage to Douglas Knowell in the civil service is a kind of a bond she has strongly rejected. However, Martha gains a deeper knowledge of herself and her society.

The Inactivity of the Heroine in Doris Lessing's

Martha Quest

"All one's life as a young woman … is on show, a focus of attention, people notice you. You set yourself up to be noticed and admired. And then, not expecting it, you become middle-aged and anonymous. No one notices you. You achieve a wonderful freedom. It's a positive thing. You can move about unnoticed and invisible."

Quoted in *An Uncommon Scold* (1989) by Abby Adams

"Nor do I know whether accepting the lesson has placed me in the rear or in the avant-garde. Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

Doris Lessing (1919-2013), a British-Zimbabwean Nobel Prize winner, manifests in her novels a rejection to the inferior roles assigned to women in a patriarchal system and to the oppression practiced against them by either capitalism or patriarchy as in *The Grass is Singing* (1950), *The Golden Notebook* (1962), and *Children of Violence* series (1952-1969), *To Room Nineteen* (1978). Her female characters try to overcome the barriers set by the male-dominant societies. They possess qualities and merits which enable them to subvert the cruel oppressive systems. The paper sheds light on one of these female characters and studies her

inactivity and burdens. Doris Lessing portrays the young daring idealistic heroine of *Martha Quest* (1952) with a "striking realism"[1] presenting her as an epitome of the spirit of her age, the twentieth century, an epoch of moral perplexities and confusions, of reassessment and redefinition, and of radical ideas. Martha Quest is also an epitome of the last-century young woman with their rage, rebellion, quest for independence and freedom, and with their sufferings and afflictions. She fights her family and her social milieu to obtain freedom, individuality and power, but she found herself unable to put her beliefs and rage into a positive action. Martha Quest's inactivity is what the following pages aim to tackle.

What is that power which a young twentieth-century woman struggles for attaining or aspires to seize, and how did she end up inactive and defeated?

Education, employment, marriage, and maternity were the available limits for a Victorian heroine from whom she gained her social strength, but the implications of power for the twentieth-century woman become wider than these limits. Martha finds that to be free requires of her not only to reject the social and moral ideologies of her family and environment but to reject "the collective pressure" which "include a social expectation for her to marry conventionally."[2] She is a highly idealistic young girl who believes in socialism, repudiates the colour bar and dislikes racial

prejudice. She desires not only to be free but to change the world into a vision she has in her own mind, that is a world free of the Afrikaans-English antipathy and of racial and sex discrimination.

Martha begins her struggle against her mother. Directing her defiance against her mother's will to preserve her as a child, she battles her for months over how she should dress, and starts smoking and using cosmetics at fifteen "saying to herself, I won't give in, I won't."[3] She resents her family—her father's irresponsibility who speaks of nothing but the war and his diabetes, and her mother's hypocrisy, snobbery and pettiness. She sees her mother as "a maniac to be resisted" (p.231). Frederick R. Karl justifies that what Martha detests in her mother is not the person or the human being but the role she stands for and which Martha feels she must resist for herself, i.e., the inferior role of a wife and a mother.[4] Lessing depicts her heroine as a "rebel" whose passion is one of opposition to things as-they-are. Her "swelling dislike of her surroundings.... [is] her driving emotion" (p.5). The novel "records Martha's struggle to refuse acquiescence and thus to escape her apparently prescribed fate."[5] Being free, she leaves home at seventeen, takes a room in the city of Salisbury[6] and works as a typist in a law office which enables her to experience the feeling of being independent. She

deliberately encounters various types of people and involves herself in sexual affairs. She "finds that the situation in Africa and in her life is considerably more complex than she had realised."[7]

Significantly, the heroine's rebellion has a different aim from that of the majority of her generation. Her contemporaries rebel at their parents, but in very different way.[8] Ironically, their rebellion is codified by convention because, in fact, they still conform to the social and political structures. They build themselves a club which functions as a parodic microcosm of the social and political ideologies of the colony that is while its system "have been designed to prevent marriage" (p. 138), the members are encouraged to experience grotesque parodies of courtship: "it was all so public, anything was permissible, the romances, the flirtations [and] the quarrels" (p. 137). Moreover, although those in charge of the Sports Club prevent any political or social argument,

> [t]he background of black servants, objects both of abuse and of mocking camaraderie reminds the reader that .... [the Club members] will in time become members of a far more powerful club—the ruling white elite.[9]

Martha does not act positively toward her ideologies. Self-consciousness and the infinite possibilities of significant doing are Martha's burdens.[10] Reading

social, psychological and political books enable her to have an outward picture of herself. She is

> ... adolescent, and therefore bound to be unhappy; British, and therefore uneasy and defensive; in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and therefore inescapably beset with problems of race and class; female and obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past (p. 8).

As a passionate sensitive "rebel," she is bound to suffer and she knows the forms of predictable suffering. She suffers "moral exhaustion" and sees herself as "an isolated person, without origin or destination" (p. 165). Evidently, her very suffering is the consequence of her revolt, her "driving individualism" (Ibid.), and her desire to be different. Her sexual relations with young men do not enhance her self-assertion and sense of specialness as much as they increase her self-degradation, anger and shame (p. 175). The new life she chooses for herself turns to be a life of madness, nonsense, and banality. "She was like a bird flitting from branch to darkening branch of an immense tree; but the tree rose as if it had no trunk, from a mist" (p. 200). Out of this life, the life of the Sports Club, the free adventurous life, Martha anticipates nothing, hopes for nothing, and sees no desirable form for her future.

One of Martha's serious weak points is her "negative narcissism" [11] to which she becomes a victim. That obviously has misled her to the right choice. She fancies that "there was nothing she could not do" (p. 209), but fantasy and daydreams are no substitutes for action. She dreams of heroism, but her dreams do not exceed the fact of being mere dreams. For example, when she sees the file of native prisoners, men and women, being taken unjustly, barefooted and shabby and handcuffed two by two, she rages at the oppressions and the injustice of the policemen, and imagines herself with them sharing their suffering. In reality she fails to do so. "And what now? demanded that sarcastic voice inside Martha; and it answered itself, Go out and join the prisoners' Aid Society. Here she sank into self-derisory impotence" (p. 167). Her "daydreams [lock] not only her mind, but her limbs" (p. 166). The miseries of her inactivity, of her sarcastic awareness and difficulty of doing something important and vital make her inadequate to win her struggle for power, for authority over her life, and for freedom from the life of her parents.

A reader may ask about Martha's sources of power and which she uses as weapons in her battle for self-governing! These are her beauty and intellect. In the meantime, these very clashing forces create irresolvable tension.

Martha, conscious of being attractive, seeks male approval through dress and cosmetics. She experiments the effect she has on young men. She wants man not to adore her figure but "to recognise her as a reasonable being," to "accept her as *herself"* (p. 156). She at once wants beauty, values it, uses it, and realises the danger of her sexuality. She admires her beautiful figure that "she [falls] into a rite of self-love" (p. 146) resolving to reject marriage and pregnancy as real threats to her beauty. No doubt, Marth disregards her needs which are in conflict with her ideas. Like any human being, her nature longs for the fulfilment of mutuality, of relationship and of love. Her need for love makes her feel insecure:

> That other veiled personage that waits, imprisoned, in every woman to be released by love, that person she feels to be (obstinately and against the evidence of all experience) what is real and enduring in her, was tremblingly insecure (p. 157).

She desires to be claimed and possessed by man while mentally she condemns such behaviours in others. Being the girlfriend of Donovan Anderson, a young handsome colonial, she is ready "to meet his wishes" (p. 143) which implies shakiness in her aims. She submits to his will like a dummy to the extent that he controls even the way she dresses. In her relationship with other men in her life she conforms to their expectations of her and this shows "the instability of her

identity. Her radical political stance begins to seem simply another instance of conformity—a woman's traditional desire for male approval.[12] "Being with Donovan, Martha feels powerless "as a lethargic person, doomed, without energy" (p. 143). She experiences the conflict of being his girl and the dislike of his dominance over her (p. 142). To the contrary of the reader's expectation, the novel ends with the marriage of the heroine to a young colonial, Douglas Knowell, in the Civil Service. With her beauty she "gets her man" acting as she condemns others of acting, but to get is not to achieve what she wants. Ironically, the heroine uses her beauty to confirm her mother's conventional view of the world.

Martha's intellect is shown also to be an ambiguous source of power and the reader sees little proofs of this gift. Her sense of specialness is primarily derived from an awareness of her superior intellectual capacity. However, this capacity has not been translated into action. Rebelling against her mother, she fails to take the matriculation-examination that would enable her to have more freedom that she anticipates. At the office she intends to work hard to be an accomplished secretary. She

> ... reminded herself that in a month of really hard work she had accomplished more than many girls do in a year.

> Well, then, it needed only determination. Determination, therefore, was what she intended to keep. (p. 176)

But she keeps postponing her regime at the first invitation from any young man. She even cannot engage herself in a regular reading to examine her own ideas or to improve her mentality. Martha involves herself in "continuous acts of self-betrayal"[13] because she is split between what she wants and what she dreams of achieving. Satisfaction with her own sense of specialness leads her to accept inactivity, to accept mediocrity. For one to be conscious of possessing a certain gift or potential leads passively to content and content in its turn leads tragically to inactivity. Thus is the situation of Martha Quest. Consciousness of her potential and of her gifts, intellect, and beauty incapacitate her to improve her mentality and seek accomplishment.

Although an intelligent young woman, she is misguided in choosing her spouse. She believes that he shares her her ideals. In fact, Douglas shares Martha her fantasies because he has no ideals himself and he values her for her beauty not for herself. They speak about future plans, they "talk, like two children at college, about growing grapes in France, or going to America, delightedly planning half a dozen different careers at once" (p. 219). Their plans do not transcend the reality of remaining a "talk." Martha's intellectual capacity remains inactive. "The brains

which she feels differentiate her from her mother lead her.... in the direction her mother would choose."[14] The marriage, therefore, shows the daughter's defeat and mother's victory although the latter has no role in forwarding the union. Evidently, Marth fails in her role as a "rebel" and in her struggle for power and her marriage emphasises this tragi-comic failure. This failure is the consequence of belittling one of her essential needs—woman's need to love and to be loved. Her restlessness and distress are due to her inability to compromise to conflicting needs within her—her needs for individuality, power, recognition, and for love.

> [I]t was as if half a dozen entirely different people inhabited her body, and they violently disliked each other, bound together by only one thing, a strong pulse of longing; anonymous, impersonal, formless, like water (p. 143).

Failure closes the novel; an inactivity to fulfil her dreams, and a failure to gain power. However, Martha Quest fights even if unsuccessfully, against the collective pressures that struggle itself is a virtue in her life. The defeat of Martha's struggles has its own significance for Doris Lessing since it arms her own heroine with a deeper knowledge of the world and with experience.

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Margins

[11][1]Marian Vlastos, "Doris Lessing and R. D. Lainy: Psychopolitics and Prophecy," *PMLA*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (March 1976), p. 245.
[2]Lynda Scott," Lessing's Early and Transitional Novels: The Beginnings of a Sense of a Selfhood," (*Deepsouth* 1998. URL: "http://www.otago.ac.nz/Deep South/vol4no1/lessing.html) 8th of April 2002.
[3]Doris Lessing, *Martha Quest* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 19. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition.
[4]R. Frederick Karl, "Doris Lessing in the Sixties: The New Anatomy of Melancholy," in *Contemporary Women Novelists*: *A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Patricia Mayer Spacks (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), p. 73.
[55]Karen Schneider, "A Different War Story: Doris Lessing's Great Escape," *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (Fall 1995), p. 262.
[6]The Quests lived in Rhodesia which was a British Colony at the early twentieth century. Zimbabwe is today's name for Rhodesia.
[7]Paul Schlueter, " Doris Lessing: The Free Woman's Commitment," in *Contemporary British Novelists*, edited by Charles Shapiro (London: Forum House, 1969), p. 53.
[8]James Gindin, "Doris Lessing's Intense Commitment," *Postwar British Fiction* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962), p. 81.
[9]Jeannette King, *Doris Lessing* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p. 16.
[10]Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1976), p. 151.

Ibid.[11]

[12]King, p. 18.
[13]Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis," Touring Lessing's Fictional World," (*Science Fiction Studies* 1922. URL: "http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/review-essays/perrak50.html) 16th of March 2003.
[14]Spacks, p. 155.