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"Between Transcendence and Fall": A Study of the Inner Space Fiction of Doris Lessing

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In the 1960s and 1970s a number of science fiction writers sought to develop a modern literary science fiction with advanced aesthetic techniques and they dealt with 'soft' sciences like psychology or sociology rather than 'hard' sciences like physics or astronomy. Many of these New Wave writers rejected outer-space stories entirely in favor of exploring the new frontiers of 'inner-space'. The emergence of psychology and sociology as popular sciences and writings of radical anti-psychiatrist like R.D.Laing shaped the New Wave fascination with 'inner-space'. Another major motivation behind the exploration of inner-space was the context of cultural moment influenced by the emergence of LSD and psychedelic counterculture. In *The Entropy Exhibition*, Greenland says that in the 1960s a populist revolution against normative consensual reality spread from west-coast of America throughout Europe, and that an active psychedelic counterculture interested in exploring new terrains of perception and new modes of expression influenced the aesthetic and political agendas of New Wave science fiction writers who valued above all "subjectivity of their vision" (Greenland 54).

The science fiction novels of Ursula LeGuin, Philip Jose Farmer, Barrington J. Bayley and Ballard use the exploration of inner recesses of the human mind (rather than the more traditional investigation of outer space) to attempt to recreate the lost imaginary phase where all things are connected by the dissolution of the self. Though not overtly related to the New Wave science fiction writers, Doris Lessing, interestingly enough, categorized her *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* as 'inner-space fiction'. As an 'alchemical writer' (Kaplan and Rose 1988:5) Lessing has progressed from orthodox communism towards feminism, irrationalism, Sufism, anti-psychiatry and-most recently- cosmic mysticism. Her novels like *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *Memoirs of a Survivor* are her fictional journeys into the 'inner space' of the psyche prior to launching of her work into 'outer space' in the science fiction that followed. The protagonists of these journeys make a turn away from the Leftist ideological framework for effecting a social change and thus the external 'revolution' turns into inward 'revelation' as the dream evolves from political to psychological alterations of the structure of reality.

In 1962, writing for *New Worlds*, the *avant-garde* science fiction magazine of the sixties J.G.Ballard advocated the separation between 'inner' and 'outer' spaces. Ballard believed that 'outer' space was no longer important and so writers should turn their attention to 'inner' space which means mind-exploration rather than space travel. What are these 'inner' and 'outer' spaces? Rudolf Arnheim has brilliantly explained these two terms in the following words: "The expanding self operates in convex space, a world populated by convex objects, displaying their outer surfaces in an endless realm. But once caught in an interior, be it the Pantheon or a room at home, the self is surrounded by the concavity of inner space. Now it is captured in a narrow world, a world, however, that by its very restriction supplies the dimensions of the whole" (Arnheim 74). While the space opera of Buck Rogers raged in the '60s, writers like Philip k Dick, William S Burroughs and J.G.Ballard, to name only a few, had begun to create darker, dystopian science fiction, emphasizing psychological effects and personal phenomena in their visions of the future. Science fiction provided the necessary tools required to reflect the uncharted

territories of our inner spaces due to its ability to imagine alternative worlds. Ballard asserted that the “biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored” (Ballard 197). He found in science fiction the means of “exploring and perhaps coming to terms with the unprecedented scale of twentieth century social and technological change, a way of grasping how and why human life had developed in the ways that it had” (Gasiorek 9). New Wave science fiction began experimenting with the inner space exploration and illumination. As for instance, Ursula LeGuin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* is an attempt at the deconstruction of individual consciousness and an exploration of inner space. The story shows nine individuals mentally connecting with one another. To take another example, J.G. Ballard’s *The Crystal World* reverberates with the idea of a return to a previous state of being. These science fiction novels of Ursula LeGuin and Ballard use the exploration of inner recesses of the human mind (rather than the more traditional investigation of outer space) to attempt to recreate the lost imaginary phase where all things are connected by the dissolution of the self. While in her early realistic novels Doris Lessing presents individuals trying to relate themselves to a fragmented social reality, trying to find social and political ways of healing that fragmentation, in novels like *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *Memoirs of a Survivor* she portrays protagonists with increasingly rich inner worlds that become more real and powerful than their everyday lives.

“A man or a woman who has, because of some mental condition lost a sense of time... A man whose ‘sense of reality’ has gone; and because of it, has a deeper sense of reality than normal people” (Lessing, *Notebook* 470) --- In *The Golden Notebook* Ella thus thinks about writing a story on such a topic and Lessing’s *Briefing for A Descent into Hell* is a story about such a man’s psychic urge to heal the schism of his present condition of self-division. The epigraphs to *Briefing* from the 14th century Sufi Mahmud Shabistari’s poem *The Secret Garden* and from Rachel Carson’s *The Edge of the Sea* describe the macrocosm encapsulated within a raindrop or a sand grain suspended in water. The unnamed narrator in the first half of the story is Everyman, rediscovering/remembering through the exploration of the microcosm of his own consciousness the macrocosmic experience of the human race. The ‘inner space’ that the story explores is the magical manifestation of ‘one little spot within the heart’ upon which ‘resteth the Lord and Master of the worlds’, where ‘two worlds commingled may be seen’ (Lessing, *Briefing* 1). That is why the psychic crisis of the protagonist is approached both from within and from without the protagonist’s consciousness—first through subjective focus of the perceiving consciousness and then through letters, dialogues and public communications. Significantly enough, the journey of the private self, the sublime sense of cosmic voyage occurs only when the protagonist is deeply asleep from medical point of view. His being is thus continuously split in two modes—outer and inner space.

A typical schizophrenic journey is described by R.D. Laing in the following words: “The journey is experienced as going further ‘in’, as going back through one’s personal life, in and back and through and beyond into the experience of all mankind, of the primal man, of Adam and perhaps even further into the being of animals, vegetables and minerals” (Laing, *Politics* 104). As Joseph Campbell observes, the “schizophrenic breakdown is an inward and backward journey to recover something missed or lost, and to restore, thereby, a vital balance” (108).

The protagonist’s “anti-clockwise” direction and his need to experience a birth in reverse suggest the circularity of his journey backward both in time and in the development of his own consciousness as he tries to locate the center of his being. The exhilarating emphasis on the words ‘around’ and ‘round’ attests to it: “Round and round and round I go...” (Lessing, *Briefing* 5) Similarly we find how the speaker is almost obsessed, as it were, with the word ‘around’, the idea of which looms large over his consciousness: “Around and around and around and around and around and around and around and around and around and around and around and around...” (Lessing, *Briefing* 8) While the ‘inner space’ journey traces the narrator’s subsequent efforts to reach the Crystal again, it figuratively recapitulates the cumulative history of life on earth. The microcosm assimilates the macrocosm, the personal dissolves into the collective: “PATIENT: You. You said We. I know that We. It is the categorical collective” (Lessing, *Briefing* 9) As Margaret Moan Rowe says, “Charlie’s absorption by the Crystal is Lessing’s attempt at directly depicting the carbon, ‘the same single radically unchanged element’ in Lawrence’s terms ; the

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‘we’ rather than the ‘I’ in Lessing’s terms”(63). After completing the seafaring the protagonist steps up on the dry salty land shaking the body like a wet dog. He experiences a sense of harmony in the hypothetical primitive pre-ego consciousness of the history of civilization. The ‘moonstruck’ and ‘moon crazed’ narrator is now able to identify himself with the moon: “I began to fancy that the moon knew me, that subtle lines of sympathy ran back and forth between us. I began to think the moon’s thoughts” (Lessing, *Briefing* 63) Such idyllic identification brings immediate illumination: “So each one of us walking or sitting or sleeping is at least two scales of time wrapped together like the yolk and white of an egg...” (Lessing, *Briefing* 64) The more he is absorbed in the Crystal the more is he liberated, and the inner space is proportionately expanded: “Which, viewed from the vantage point of the enclosing web of light was not at all a question of individual entities, as those entities saw themselves, but a question of Wholes, large and small”(Lessing, *Briefing* 109) In this illuminated primordial perspective the smaller categories lose their relevance:

...for since any category anywhere always bear on its own wavelength of sound/light, there could not be individuals in this nourishing web. Together they formed one beat in the great dance, one note in the song... On every level: even myself and my friends whom the Crystal had absorbed into a whole, unimportant gnats, and my women and my children and everyone I had known in my life—even someone passed on a street corner and smiled at once—these struck a note, made a whole.(Lessing, *Briefing* 111)

Though each human being is born with this experience of harmony and wholeness, subsequent experience erodes the primary knowledge and substitutes division: “Some sort of a divorce there has been somewhere along the path of this race of man between the “I” and the “we”, some sort of a terrible falling-away...” (Lessing, *Briefing* 120)

As already noted, Lessing has interestingly called her novel ‘inner-space fiction’, suggesting a generic hybrid, a cross between science fiction and psycho-fiction. In the light of Lessing’s interest in modern physics, which she openly acknowledges in her Introduction to *The Sirian Experiments* and illustrates throughout her *Canopus* series, *Briefing* can be seen as her early effort to use the findings of quantum mechanics to express his own ideas regarding uncertainty, wholeness, and mutability. In sum, says Fishburn, *Briefing* like *Canopus*, is ‘intended to achieve nothing less than a total transformation of the way we perceive reality’ (“Briefing...” 50). The protagonist’s larger task is to bring the truths discovered in the collective memory to personal awareness, to fuse the split between the generic Everyman of the inner space journey and the individual self of the waking life: “Now the permanent staff on Earth has always had one main task, which is to keep alive, in any way possible, the knowledge that humanity, with its fellow creatures, the animals and plants, make up a whole, are a unity, have a function in the whole system as an organ or organism”(Lessing, *Briefing* 141)

Briefing has striking parallels with *Woman on the Edge of Time* where we find that a woman is diagnosed as mentally ill—an illness which enables her to visit alternate futures. With Piercy’s book as a model, we can safely say that the people whom we perceive as mentally ill are actually capable of experiencing realities unknown to us all—an argument which is asserted in Lessing’s *Shikasta* where a purportedly insane woman explains that she has been born with the capacity to receive a larger percent of reality than the rest of us. That the inner journey of the protagonist is itself both a reflection of and an effort to heal the division is the central assumption of the story. As R.D. Laing has said, “the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may let in light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people whose minds are closed” (*Divided Self* 27).

Katherine Fishburn justly observes that what Lessing does here is that she challenges us to join Charles in his miraculous journey to points unknown: “If we accept the challenge, we too will experience the awful joys and madness of transcendence. We too will dare disturb the universe” (*The Unexpected Universe* 34) If the first major section of the novel shows the light shining through the cracked mind of the protagonist, the remainder of the novel provides a partial explanation for the crack. In *The Politics of Experience* Laing says, “Can we not see that this voyage is not what we need to be cured of, but that it is

itself a natural way of healing our own appalling state of alienation called normality?”(Laing, *Politics* 136)

“To love one another... to respect the laws of harmony” (Lessing, *Briefing* 145), Lessing sees these as the imperative needs of twentieth century humankind. And paradoxically this sense of the ‘we’ can emerge only as a result of the exploration of the self, of the awareness, of the identity of the self. As noted by Douglas Bolling, Northrop Frye’s comment on the conclusion of *Finnegans Wake* is perfectly suited to the ending of *Briefing*: “What happens there is that the dreamer, after spending the night in communion with a vast body of metaphorical identifications, wakens and goes about his business forgetting his dream, like Nebuchadnezzar, failing to use, or even to realize that he can use, the ‘the keys to dreamland’. What he fails to do is therefore left for the reader to do...” (564) Such imaginative interpretation, though promising, cannot hide the tragedy of Charlie’s final medical cure, which is that he has recovered his former identity only to lose, once again, the meaning of his journey. Marion Vlastos has pointed out this tragedy that troubles transcendence: “Clearly, the trip that involves complete loss of the ego—an ideal of the hip culture of the sixties—will solve no problems; if the individual is to emerge from his experience able to communicate or embody what he has learned, the unique self must not be submerged”(Vlastos 257)

In *Memoirs of a Survivor* the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ spaces of *Briefing* are represented in terms of the ‘impersonal’ and ‘personal’ level of existence and apprehension. Already in *Briefing* the protagonist’s moment of inner illumination witnessed the erosion of small categories and classifications; here in *Memoirs* such categories are completely dissolved. Sanity and madness, freedom and imprisonment, outmoded and radical values are cogently commingled with one another. For instance, the flashback to domestic archetypes, by demonstrating how traditional norms often sanctioned the perverse and fantastic, rub out the boundaries between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’, and the lines between human and animal, and childhood and maturity.

Laing’s discussion of transcendental experience explains that “one enters the other world by breaking a shell: or through a door; through a partition: the curtains part or rise: a veil is lifted” (Lessing, *Memoirs* 139). In *Memoirs* the protagonist’s visit through the wall beyond is the journey ‘inward’. Quite naturally the metaphors of ‘remembrance’ and ‘forgetting’, ‘going’ and ‘coming back’ occur frequently as in *Briefing*: “I went on with the little routines of my life, conscious of the life behind the wall, but not remembering my visit there... How did I manage to forget? And again the wall dissolved and I was through” (Lessing, *Memoirs* 13)

In the time of ‘the general break-up of things’, Reality is a public prison, an ‘enemy’; whereas the journey through the ‘inner space’ becomes an encouraging escape, a revelatory release. These two levels of existence are here continually contrasted. For the narrator to enter the ‘personal’ was to ‘enter a prison, where nothing could happen but what one saw happening, hence she returned to it always with a ‘dismay, a not-wanting’ (Lessing, *Memoirs* 66). When Emily Cartright first met the narrator, the narrator thought that her look ‘was the expert assessment of possibilities by a prisoner observing a new jailor’ (Lessing, *Memoirs* 15). In contrast to this claustrophobic confinement and miserable monotony of the ‘personal’ world is posited the infinitely illuminating ‘impersonal’ world, a gateway of plentiful possibilities:

“...in that realm there was a lightness, a freedom, a feeling of possibility. Yes, that was it, the space and the knowledge of the possibility of alternative action” (Lessing, *Memoirs* 41)

“...it was always liberation to step away from my ‘real’ life into this other place, so full of possibilities, of alternatives” (Lessing, *Memoirs* 64)

The two worlds were initially so much mutually exclusive that the narrator could not patch them up:

“... looking back now, it is as if two ways of life, two lives, two worlds lay side by side and closely connected. But then one life excluded the other and I did not expect the two worlds ever to link up” (Lessing, *Memoirs* 25)

However she was soon able to find out a connection between the two worlds as the one overlapped the other: “But now began a period when something of the flavor of the space behind the wall did continuously invade my real life” (Lessing, *Memoirs* 145) The ‘inner space’ gradually turned into the

‘child-space’ as what the narrator saw in her journey is ‘a scene’ from Emily’s memory or history ‘which had formed her’ (Lessing, *Memoirs* 45). Emily’s memories or experiences were thus ‘being “run” like a film’ behind her living-room wall. In this illuminating moment the two worlds were close together.

Jean Pickering in *Marxism and Madness: The Two Faces of Dorris Lessing’s Myth* argues that Lessing’s ‘politics of the left’ and ‘politics of madness’ both have the common image of an archetypal ideal city: “the collapse of the revolutionary dream does not lead to introversion and retreat into a private world, for the madness that Lessing espouses, being an extension of ‘I’ into ‘We’ as a further step in the evolutionary process is far from solipsistic” (Pickering 30). At the very beginning of *Memoirs* such a dream is envisaged: “And then life would begin, life as it ought to be, as it had been promised—by whom? When? Where? – to everybody on this earth” (Lessing, *Memoirs* 34) In the end this dream assumes a palpable reality: “Both walked quickly behind that One who went ahead showing them the way out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether” (Lessing, *Memoirs* 213)

In *Memoirs*, the illuminating journey through ‘inner space’ opens up the portals for realizing archetypal scenario. Thus Emily’s ‘sweeping out dead leaves’ implies sweeping away of dead values and of a deadening way of life on behalf of the whole society so that a fresh start can be made. As Derek Wright says, “the nursery scenes, though charged with a personal urgency, have an archetypal quality, a quality of having happened to everyone (sibling rivalry, Oedipal tensions, oral-anal regression)...These are the experiences of an irredeemably past world, they represent the whole historical legacy of Western rationalism” (88). The journey through the ‘unsubstantial walls’ works as a balm to her restlessness: “Because of this feeling, born of the experiences behind the wall, I was changing. A restlessness, a hunger that had been with me all my life, that had always been accompanied by a rage of protest...was being assuaged” (Lessing, *Memoirs* 100)

Quite expectedly as ‘the last walls dissolved’ in the end, the narrator achieves a soothing sense of the forces and impulses that can save us from total destruction (Lessing, *Memoirs* 213). What Barbara Hill Rigney says about the optimism embodied in *The Children of Violence* series, is true for the ending of *Memoirs*: “They [the children] are possibly, to provide the rebirth of the world ; they can, potentially, create a new world, one which might not sink into darkness and schizophrenia, but might remain whole, perceptive, undivided” (88). In contrast to the purely psychological integration achieved by Anna Wulf, or the transcendental wholeness struggled toward by Martha, the survivor in *Memoirs* acquire an even more all-encompassing integration by the end of the novel.

As with *Briefing*, the transcendental turn in *Memoirs* is fraught with a basic limitation—if what is discovered on the voyage is not translated into palpable reality, it bears no fruit at all. Derek Wright finds the novel “subversive and partly self-undermining” because, especially in the end, the reader is “left floundering in midair, in a kind of hermeneutic vertigo” (89). The narrator’s own survival is ambiguous as her description of the passage of Emily, Gerald, Hugo and the children ‘into another order of world’ is that of an outsider. Has she herself crossed into that other world or has she remained in her original world? The question remains wide open. The very existence of her memoirs shows that she has not merely survived the chaotic age in which she lived, but also the temptation to go through the world for good. Sheila C. Conboy justly observes, “While obviously believing that such journeys can be creative, Lessing eventually asserts that they can be dangerous as well—that the desire for wholeness and transcendence can lead one to entrapment on the other side of the wall” (76).

Lessing’s *The Summer Before the Dark* has some similar motifs in depicting Kate Brown’s life but it puts greater emphasis on her outer space journeys and experiences. Considering this novel as an overtly inner space one akin to the two discussed above becomes problematic because of the novel’s inherent limitations:

In all of the novel’s locales, Lessing offers trenchant social commentary of the world organizations, the travel patterns of the young, the sexism of British workmen, and the like. The problem for the reader is that both inner and outer space are recorded by the same omniscient narrator whose magisterial voice is more appropriate to the analysis of social stereotypes faced by women than to the protagonist’s inner explorations presented most directly in the sequential dream of taking the seal back to the ocean. Lessing’s difficulty in

The Summer Before the Dark is an omniscient narration that is more attuned to outer than to inner space. (Moan Rowe 70)

In *The Summer Before the Dark* Kate's dreams accompany him throughout her physical journeys in the summer from London to Turkey to Spain. In the end her self-revelations and realizations make her truly mature and rejuvenated like the seal she rescues in her dreams: "...she knew that it was full of life, and, like her, of hope" (Lessing, *Summer* 266). She finds herself amidst 'spring grass' and 'spring flowers'. The heavenly promise of fulfillment and transcendence in Lessing's inner space fictions thus interestingly parallels Laing's description of similar experience: "...When I came out I suddenly felt that everything was so much more real than it had been before. The grass was greener, the sun was shining brighter, and people were more alive, I could see them cleaner. I could see the bad things and the good things and all that. I was much more aware" (*Politics* 136) The inner space journey is thus no doubt transcendental and revelatory; but it does not ascertain any significant way out as it is not eventually translated into and properly wedded with palpable reality. But the inner space vision which the individual experiences, though not helping the collective, helps the individual either to regain psychic equilibrium or to maintain it by offering a cathartic release amidst the threat of alienation and annihilation. Moreover, Lessing's inner space fictions question the readers' preconceived structure of realities to tease out the possibilities of alternate realities beyond the confines of reasons and restrictions: "It is of course true that Doris Lessing has moved away from the traditional reflection of social reality, from the "slice of life" in her work, but her development is not an escapist one culminating in a fantastic, private, and possibly irrelevant vision. Rather she is trying "to push the boulder up the mountain" by widening the reader's view of reality..." (Kuns 84)

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