Chapter-5

_The Summer Before the Dark_, is one of the matures and shortest novels of Lessing. In bulk it is as nothing before the novel-series _Children of Violence_. Also, as a single novel it is much shorter, less than half, the size of _The Golden Notebook_. But what this particular novel has lost in bulk has been made up by neatness of form and maturity of attitude. In every way, whether in construction or subject-matter, in the art of characterization or in realism of detail, in maturity of attitude or of language, it is a very fine book. This book, too, is symptomatic of the second wave of feminism. Once more, as in her books studies so far, Doris Lessing lays stress on self-recognition, and though it, self-liberation. But unlike in _The Four-Gated City_, there is neither any mysticism nor any preoccupation with the future. This is a book much more near to ordinary modern life. There is no fantasy here, but open-eyed recognition of the reality that surrounds us as well as of the reality of our nature.

There is only one central figure around whom the entire novels is built up, all the other characters, whether male or female, are subsidiary ones. Some of them are strongly portrayed and some only sketchily done. She is Mrs. Michael Brown or Kate when informally addressed. The book concerns her and in the process of her own psychological development, also the development of a few others. Only a few months in her life are portrayed a season. It is the summer season, as the title affirms, that is given
in the novel. As she is forty-five years old, it is implied that this is the last summer of her youth, or the rather middle age. After this will come the onset of old age, or “the dark” of the little. So the content of the book is spread over about four months from May to September or October of Kate Brown’s forty-fifth year. These few months are extremely eventful ones.

This book, much more so than *The Golden Notebook*, can be called a bildungs-roman, though it can be objected that in this novel we do not have the portrayal of the growth of a youth into manhood but that of a middle-aged person into self-recognition. It is, therefore, not a bildungs-roman as Goethe thought of it and as Lessing had written before, but a modified version of it. It is the story of the mental development of a middle-aged woman into a riper and more mature personality. She sees herself, in the last few pages of the book, as a renovated, stronger person; ‘Her experiences of the last months, her discoveries, herself definition; what she hoped were now strengths, were concentrated here.’ (TSBD 269)

The narrative strategies used in this novel are also not conventional ones. But all these features, the theme, the form, the characterization etc. will be dealt with in details afterwords. It is necessary first to get better acquainted with the book.

The novel opens with Kate Brown preparing the afternoon tea for her family in her home and right from the beginning Lessing creates the atmosphere, the mood which is peculiar to this novel. Kate, or, more
formally, Mrs. Michael Brown, is a happily married woman who is forty-five years old and has four grown-up children. She has arrived at a turning-point in her life and she is apprehensive of what the future might hold. Up till now she has been a very competent wife and mother, the knot that held the family together. All her thoughts, all her actions, had been for her family, for her husband and four children. She had hardly ever thought about her own self, her own pleasure and her own wishes. She has been a devoted mother and a devoted wife. But now she starts having misgivings about small, everyday things, about daily happenings, having doubts about her own competence, about exactly how successful she has been:

Perhaps she had been insensitive? Perhaps both Tim and Eileen - who were after all grown up were nineteen and twenty two – had not enjoyed the day’s small contriving as much as it had seemed. (TSBD4)

Not only does she think of the day’s happenings with misgivings, the authorial comment tells us that this has, of late, become a tendency, a pre-occupation with her:

The truth was, she was becoming more and more uncomfortably conscious not only that the things she said, and a good many of the things she thought, had been taken down off a rack and put on, but that what she really felt was something else again. (TSBD 4)

This self-critical mood lasts throughout the novel. Along with it there goes the dualism between what she said and what she really felt, between her outer and her inner self. The two aspects, throughout the novel, run side
by side and are extremely difficult to separate. Indeed, even technically, it is difficult to know whether to classify them as them or as narrative strategy. Even as early as this in the novel (p.7 only) the maturity of Kate’s thinking or attitude is glimpsed. It is also a glimpse into the author’s own maturity of attitude, because in her other books the heroines even when they are thoughtful, are not shown having thoughts like the ones that come to her a bit later, to be quoted below. These are thoughts that come only to a mature person, perhaps not even to a person forty-five years old, as Kate Brown is. The kind of thought that comes to her are not the typical thoughts of middle age, but of an older Person - a person who has undergone much suffering in life, had many experiences of the blows that life can deal one. She has these thoughts, which can easily be said to be profound ones, while she waiting at her doors for the Kettle to come to the boil. She thinks:

   We are what we learn.
   It often takes a long and painful time. Unfortunately, there was no doubt, too, that a lot of time, a lot of pain, went into learning very little.
   . . She was really feeling that?
   Yes, she was. (TSBD 7)

She then prepares the coffee for her husband and children and loads the tray and brings it out in the garden. But before they come and start having the coffee, there are many more thoughts that come into her mind. In fact this part of the book is full of these cogitations of hers, interspersed with authorial comments. It creates the atmosphere for the whole book and also recreates the past, her character, her marital and domestic life. As a
first chapter, it is also full of certain crucial events, but the events come later, the thoughts come first. Highly feministic thoughts, some of them, highlight her past life as a devoted wife and mother who has let her family always direct her actions. She has been a woman for whom the family came first, and now, now that her children have all grown up (the youngest, Tim, is nineteen) she has the time and the leisure to review her past life and think that up till now she has lived for other, not for herself, and starts having resentments:

That’s what’s wrong; there must be something I could be seeing now, something I could understand now, some course of action I could chose... Choose? when do I ever choose? Have I ever chosen?

(TSBD9)

Another feature of the novel that is specially remarkable in these first few pages (Later one becomes used to them) consists of the frequent descriptions of Kate Brown. They come in nearly every page, interspersed with her reflections, her memories and her movements as she prepares the coffee. They are short, graphic pictures of her as she stands and moves about, describing her appearance, and, while doing so, also sketching in her character to some extent:

A woman walked out of a side door over a lawn that needed cutting and was attractively dotted with daisies, towards a tree in her garden. This woman was Kate Brown... She carefully carried her tray, and she was thinking about the washing up while she continued her private stock-taking, her accounts making... She was wishing that whatever stage of her life she was in now could be got through quickly.
A woman in a white dress, white shoes, a pink scarf around her neck, standing on grass. (TSBD 7, 8)

This kind of picture comes, interspersed with her thoughts and actions, no less than seven times in the first ten pages, all before the family starts taking the coffee. All this is by way of creating the atmosphere and establishing a thoughtful mood.

After this, as the family gathers for taking coffee, events start taking place. It so happens that her husband’s friend, Alan Post, has come there to attend a conference of Global Food, United Nations concern. This conference is facing difficulties because of lack of translators. Delegates have come from all over the world and many translators are needed. At present they do not have anyone who is able to translate Portuguese into English and vice versa. It appears that Kate was the daughter of an English-naturalized Portuguese and can speak the language as a native. So Alan Post wants to employ her as one, during the three summer months.

As it is, during the coming summer months Kate will be alone at home. Her husband will be in America on a teaching assignment and her four children will be dispersed in different countries, doing jobs, attending camps etc. She had been looking forward to a few months of leisure, of having some time for herself, to spend as she liked. But she had also been thinking of it with foreboding, thinking that she will not be
needed after this and what will she do in future when her children, all grown up, will not need her any longer. The fear of being unwanted, of being redundant, had been haunting her and this is why she had been so thoughtful in the first few pages.

Now that this heaven-sent opportunity has come her way, she hesitates. It is not because she is apprehensive that she will not be able to cope with the job. There is no lack of self-confidence in her. She is worried about domestic matters, such as, will they have to shut up the house for the time? At present the job is only for two weeks. She does not know, nor does the writer tell the reader at this stage, that it will be continued for the whole of the summer months. Moreover, she is worried about what is going to happen when she comes back:

And when her committee was over, what would she do? It was being taken for granted she would fit herself in somewhere — how flexible she was being, just as always, ever since her children were born. (TSBD 22)

But in spite of all such misgivings she agrees to take on the job. It is decided that the house is to be let for the summer, and they will re-occupy it and she joins Global Food in due time. Everything is described in detail.

It is a great international concern, with branches all over the world. Conferences are held all over the world, in the capitals of different
countries. Money is not an object here. Kate, an ordinary middle-class woman, is shocked at the salary she is offered. It is a sum beyond her wildest dreams, but it is only ordinary for Global Food. The committees are held in shining new modern buildings. The delegates are all internationally known people, they are all offered accommodation in big hotels. The environment is one of easy-going affluence, of casual assumption of power. It is something which Kate is not in the least bit accustomed to, it is absolutely alien to her. The atmosphere of the conference is built up very carefully:

In this room were decided the fates and fortunes of millions of little people, what crops they were going to grow, what they would eat, and wear—and think.

Such a collection of many-coloured, many-nationed handsome men and women would be what a film producer would try to shoot to make a scene from some idealised picture of united nations. But would the actors have been able to convey such a perfection of casual authority, such assurance? (TSBD 29)

But she is highly adaptable and competent. She quickly grasps the essentials of her job and is not only efficient, but good, at it. The writer shows her as adapting to the completely different circumstances and, what is more, excelling at it. This is a triumphantly feminist outlook—a woman, mature and self-possessed, can triumph over any circumstance, however alien it may be. Before long she becomes an integral part of the
unit, of the conference and she finds herself getting on familiar terms with not only the officials (of whom she herself is one) but with the delegates also. They come to her for advice about what to buy and where to go for shopping etc. Since they are all new to the city and do not know anything about it. She finds herself to be a popular as well as useful figure. Charlie Cooper is on the organizing side and he not only helps her in the beginning, but before many days have passed makes it clear to her that she has become a valued member—valued not only for her work as a translator, but as a general helper too. She realizes that she is doing what she did at home and did so well-looking after people, supplying their needs, like an elder sister.

She starts planning for what she will do after the conference is over. She will not be able to go home. Not only will her children and her husband not be there, the house itself has been let. It is occupied by other people. She decides that she will spend the rest of the summer with Rose, a friend she has in Sussex. For the past few weeks she had been staying in a hotel room provided by Global Food. For the first time she has been alone in a room, in a room not cluttered by the possessions of a family, but containing only her own things. She looks at that room and compares it with her own large house and with Rose’s cottage and thinks that, had she any choice, this is what she would choose. This is not a rejection of family life, or of domestic duties. It is just a feminist wish for individual identity. It is just a
desire for what Virginia Woolf called “a room of one’s own” where a woman can withdraw into her own self, as an individual.

Then she dreams. This is a very important dream. It recurs, with modifications, throughout the novel, down to the last chapter which takes place in one of the flats she had rented at the time when all the conferences had ended and she could not go home because it was rented out. In all this highly significant dream occurs no less than thirteen times in the novel and here in the second chapter (Global Food) it comes for the first time.

It is a dream about a seal. She dreams that she is on a rocky hillside in a northern country. The landscape is unknown to her. Someone calls her attention to the seal lying at her feet:

> It was a seal, lying stranded and helpless among dry rocks high on a cold hillside. It was moaning. She picked it up. It was heavy. She asked if it were all right, if she could help it. It moaned, and she knew she had to get it to water. She started to carry the seal in her arms down the hill. (TSBD 34,35)

The dream, each time it comes, becomes a bit more detailed, a little longer. It is clearly allegorical. Like all allegories, it carries multiple layers of meaning and a moral lesson. What exactly the seal signifies is never made clear, perhaps because Doris Lessing does not want to diminish its richness of meaning by limiting it to just one meaning. It can easily mean several things as it stands. It can, at the simplest, most obvious level, mean a symbol for any marine animal, which is definitely not the meaning
intended by the author. It can mean the conference itself, which she has to see to its conclusion. But this again, is too simple a meaning for the context. It can mean her family, which has need of her for its smooth running. But this too does not seem to have been meant by the author. It can mean suffering humanity which seems to be the intended meaning. In that case the difficulties and the overwhelming pity she experiences in rescuing it can be explained. The dream gains deeper and deeper meaning with each repetition.

Doris Lessing’s characters often have highly significant dreams. But this is the first time that a short dream is continued through the novel, being lengthened a little each time it comes. Moreover, usually her characters have dreams that are intimately related to their personal life, or to their character, or to their family life. This is the case, for example, in *The Golden Notebook* as has been already pointed out in the last chapter. They are long dreams, five or six pages long, all concerned with the split personality of the dreamer. This is quite clear from the dream:

As I lay on the surface of the dream-water, and began very slowly to submerge, this person said, “Anna, you are betraying everything you believe in; you are sunk in subjectivity, yourself, your own needs.” But the Anna who wanted to slip under the dark water would not answer.

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But, then, the character who dreams is a schizophrenic person so this kind of dream is explicable. This dream of Kate Brown’s however, is not
that of a mentally sick person about her own self. This is the dream of an eminently sane woman and it is a highly philanthropic dream. It highlights all the noble qualities of man, compassion, the desire to help a person who needs it and moreover, the active effort to help. As we shall see in the last, the thirteenth dream, this attempt is successful at the end. All the best qualities of humanity are to be found in it. What is more, it exemplifies the best teachings of Christianity itself: Love for all, help for all, succour for all. This will become clearer and clearer as the novel proceeds.

After recounting the dream Kate’s story is resumed. By now we have reached the end of the two-week conference, the duration of time for which she had been employed. The day before it ends she is offered the job for one more month, for another conference due to start soon. She accepts with alacrity. She is now offered the job, not of a translator, but that of an organizer, at a higher scale of pay. Her abilities, in other words, have been recognized by the authorities. It is something that renews her confidence in herself. She is, naturally enough, elated. She will now be earning more than her husband who is a neurologist of many years’ standing. She feels that in the world where she is now, ordinary rules of everyday world do not apply.

The next meeting of the conference is to be held in Turkey. It is she who has to organize it. She has to do a lot of telephoning and maneuvering before everything can be fixed satisfactorily, because whichever city she chooses becomes impossible because of some reasons or other. But she
manages everything in a most efficient manner and finally the venue is fixed. Then she has to inform all the delegates, arrange for their putting up at a hotel and also arrange for their trips for sight-seeing and shopping. She had to arrange for their return trip from the conference. So her time is fully occupied to mid-July.

Then once more there are some passages highlighting her thought-processes after she has finished all the arrangements and has some free time before she has to start for Turkey. She goes and buys a few dresses and other things. Then we have one of those detached descriptions that occur throughout the novel and give some indications of her outward appearance, of how she might appear to an outsider:

A woman stood in front of large mirrors in many shops, looking . . . at a woman in her early forties who was still the same shape she had been all her adult life.

. . . . a pleasant-looking fashionable woman on the verge of middle age.

Still on the verge, - she had not chosen to enter the state. (TSBD 39,40)

She discovers that she is still attractive to men. She finds that she had been so immersed in her family, in being primarily a mother and a wife, that she had forgotten that she was still a woman, attractive to men. Here the attitude, to some extent, of feminism is absent. In her desire of attracting men, of appearing attractive to them, she is being a fully traditional woman. She is shaking herself free of the bondage of family and trying to be independent, but, in order to preserve her identity she still
wants the attention of men. This is not the attitude of the feminists of the Second Wave. She is, moreover, conscious that she is thinking and behaving in a way no married woman does. She herself disapproves of it. She is behaving, not like a married woman, but like a young girl:

Exactly as a young girl does, suddenly conscious of her powers of generalized attractions, so now with Kate: an internal thermostat was definitely set, saying not: You over there, yes, you, come and get me! but: Ah, how infinitely desirable you all are; if I wished I could be available, but it is up to you, and really it is much more exciting to be like this, floating in the air of general appreciation and approval; it would be an awful bore to confine myself to one. (TSBD 41,42)

But, then, as it has been pointed out already, in her heart of hearts she disapproves of these thoughts within herself. Most significantly, as she thinks these thoughts she again and again thinks of Mary, a friend and neighbor of hers:

This is something no married woman does. (Except Mary). …Never mind about Mary. No really married woman sets the thermostat for Tom, Dick and Harry… Not if she wishes to stay married. (Or doesn’t mind being like Mary, whose life for the fifteen years Kate had known her, had been like a French farce.) (TSBD 42)

As it can be seen, in this short extract Mary’s name occurs no less than three times. The time has come to mention her role in the book. Actually she does not play any role as such. She hardly ever comes into the book to influence the action. All references to her are in her memory flashbacks. But these occur constantly. Almost every time that she thinks, or reminisces, there are references to her. So she influences her thoughts as well as action in an indirect manner. She is her friend and lives in the house
opposite her own. The first reference to her comes very early in the book, while she is waiting to serve coffee in the garden: “Mary Finchley opposite dressed as she would have done if she had no children and was unmarried.” (TSBD 10,11)

This woman is very different from herself and also from the other women she has known. Mary has no sense of morality or of family responsibility. She is entirely free from all moral scruples. She thinks only of herself, taking pleasure in dressing like a young girl, in attracting men and having affairs with them in an entirely casual manner. She is thoroughly light-hearted about it. She had even tried to seduce Michael, Kate’s husband. But she was entirely casual about it. There is no depth of feeling in her. She would buy a dress as casually as have a brief affair with a man, with any man, and forget about it. Throughout the book Kate goes on imagining what Mary would have said in her circumstances. It is always in opposition to her own reactions. In the last few pages she describes Mary to Maureen:

It took me a very long time to understand that Mary was really quite different from me. From every woman ‘I’ve ever known . . . Something’s been left right out of her. . . Nothing has taken on Mary. She hasn’t any sense of guilt, that’s the point. . . She married quite young. . . But she was unfaithful right from the start. . . If she goes shopping and she fancies a man and there’s an opportunity, there you are. She never thinks about it again. (TSBD 248,249)

The description goes on for more than four pages, giving numerous concrete instances of Mary’s extraordinariness. When Maureen asks her
what her conclusions about Mary were, she says she has never been able to come to any conclusion about her except that she is different. Nor can the reader. In fact it is doubtful if such a character as is described here can at all exist. Here indeed Lessing’s art of characterization lacks credibility.

Be that as it may, this constant reference to Mary makes it seem as if she is supposed to function as a foil to Kate, or function as her after ego. Again and again does Kate think of her, but, as she does not contribute to the action she is of doubtful importance. She should not, however, be totally neglected by the reader as her name occurs so many times in the novel, and that, also, in the important passages dealing with Kate’s thoughts or memories. In the passage quoted, for example, her names six times in one paragraph.

Kate then goes to an expensive hair-dresser and has her hair dyed and arranged in a stylish and becoming manner. This is important because this hair-style motif is repeated again and again and is an important factor in determining her outlook on life. She looks attractive and like a loyal and loving wife wishes her husband were there to look at her and appreciate her. But she has very different thoughts about her children. She is sure they will disapprove as they disapprove of Mary Finchley’s dressing like a young girl. She herself, and Lessing, calls this attractiveness of hers, which she thinks to be mainly the product of a glamorous hair-style and fashionable dresses, “setting her thermostat,” as though she can switch her
glamour on and off merely by pressing a button. In fact, later in the book, this happens several times. She experiences with her attractiveness exactly as if she is switching it on and off. This is going to happen when the conference is over and she is at a loose end, whiling her time away till the tenants leave her house and she can go home to be reunited with her family after this hectic summer is over.

She discovers that by altering her posture, the way of doing her hair, she can alter her thermostat of attraction. It is extraordinary:

Soon she discovered that if she wanted to be alone, she should sit badly, in a huddled or discouraged posture, and allow her legs to angle themselves unbecomingly. If she did this men did not see her . . . It gave her a dislocated feeling, as if something had slipped out of alignment. For she was conscious . . . that the person who sat there watching, shunned or ignored by men who would otherwise have been attracted to her, was not in the slightest degree different from the person who could bring them all on again towards her by adjusting the picture of herself.

(TSBD 49-50)

Then, the same night that she realizes that she can be attractive or not, as she wants, she has the dream about the seal that she had had before. This is the second time that she has it. She begins to realize its importance and so does the reader. This dream lasts longer. In it she sees that the seal has hurt itself in several places. So she puts it down and tears some leaves
from a shrub growing nearby. She chews the leaves and puts the juice on the wounds, and then she takes it up again. Here the dream ends.

Thus in this dream she takes a more active part in helping the seal. Not only does she carry it but she also tries to heal the wounds. But she is still searching for water. The dream has not ended.

Then she leaves for Turkey. She arrives at the hotel where they have to put up and she sees that everything is properly arranged for the conference. One of the hotel employees had been entrusted with this job. His name is Ahmed and he is a very good-natured and obliging person. They quickly become friends.

This man speaks French and German and English. So they have a multi-lingual conversation. Here Lessing points out that though they are in Turkey, Kate does not hear the language spoken, except very fitfully. They are in an enclosed world, a world that is alien to the world that surrounds it outside the hotel. The furniture in the hotel, the food they eat, the language they speak, everything is European.

In the evening they all go out in a sight-seeing tour and it is only at night, as she goes to bed, that she is able to think of her family. She is, however, so much a part of the conference by now that the thought of her children does not produce any feeling of guilt or of grief as it used to do formerly. There is a change in her personality:
She knew that she was already blooming, expanding, enlarging, - she was wanted, needed; she was going to be in demand all day and most of the night. (TSBD 58)

This being needed by others is what she herself needed, this is what she had been afraid of losing in the beginning of summer, in the beginning of the novel. Here it should be pointed out that this is not the ideal of the Second Save feminist who sees woman as totally independent of man, financially as well as emotionally. Here we see Kate financially independent but still needing the support of others. This need takes two forms: (a) men’s approval of her appearance (b) that others, tier family, the delegates et al., might need her. In the other books also the heroine helps others in various ways, specially in a psychological manner, helping them to know themselves just as she comes to know herself. Here in this book that state has not come. Kate helps others, but entirely in a material way, not psychologically or spiritually. That will come much later. She will help other characters in realizing their personality just as the other heroines do. This is Lessing’s own special contribution.

She realizes that she is getting, slowly, transformed. She has now started to resent many things that she had taken for granted, as being her due, for so long. This has to be treated in a feminist manner – the consciousness that, not only as a woman, but also as an individual, she was being deprived these days. This is what all feminists ask for – that woman should be conscious of the fact that they are being oppressed, being refused
their rights. This was the demand of the feminists of the first wave. Only, in that case the demand was for voting rights and other legal rights. Then, when these were obtained the demands became more subtle. Here, for example, we see Kate getting conscious of the oppression and deprivation brought about by her own sense of duty or responsibility to her own family. There is no real oppression here, no domestic tyranny. Hers is a family which loves her and needs her. Perhaps that is why she never felt herself as being deprived in any way. Her own sense of responsibility and her own sense of morality (which, as is pointed out again and again, Mary Finchley did not have) prevented her having any consciousness of it. Besides, she enjoyed managing her family, took pride in her neat home, took pride in her efficiency. It is only now, separated from her family, leading a completely different kind of life, that she realizes she has missed something:

Injustice, the pain of it, had been waiting for her all these last years. But she had not allowed herself to feel it, or not for long. She had instead carefully tended the image of the marriage . . . that was the result of intelligent discussions with her husband. (TSBD 59)

In addition to having this sense of grievance, which is new to her, she, as has already been pointed out, become conscious of her attractiveness, of her usefulness, of her popularity. It is as if she has found a new self. She and Ahmed, in a united spirit, have to look after the delegates. She likes doing it and is doing it superlatively well. She is a successful woman who does not need her family in order to be successful.
She had been successful at home for so long, now she is successful out of it as well.

There is here a passage on girls who work at these places. These are not important for the action of the novel, nor for characterization. Yet they are not irrelevant either. This is not only passage of this type. Two or three times before this also such passages have come. There is such a passage when Kate has just joined Global Food and everything is new to her. At that time she had seen these girls, all from the middle or the upper middle classes. They are not clerks or anything like that. What post they fill is not made clear. They are just attractive young women, to help the delegates, to provide friendship and company:

It meant covetable escorts if not active affairs. As for the delegates who surged through this building . . . these girls offered the possibility of the best kind of dinner and theatre companion, affairs without strings, the choice of secretaries of the most enviable kind. (TSBD 46-47)

After this also these girls have been described. The reason why they are being referred to is the change of Kate’s attitude to them. Before this, whenever they have been described, she had been only a detached observer. She had observed them from outside, as it were. Now there is a subtle but clear difference. Now she is no longer outside. She has started to feel that she belongs to the same group. They smile all the time and so does she. She also thinks of the future of these girls and of her own future. These girls will soon marry and go out of the place. If later they want to come back to
the same job it will be too late. They will have become too old. These thoughts come to Kate because it is nearly the middle of July and in two more days the conference will come to an end. Kate becomes apprehensive. What will she do when the conference is over. Just before the first conference in which she was employed as a translator came to an end she had the same thoughts.

As she stands in the hotel lobby a man she had seen before comes up to her and invites her to go on a trip with him to Konia. He was an American tourist, a man-about-town, working in advertising and publicity. But four years ago he had given up this job. He was a man of independent means and did not have to work for his living. Now quite clearly he is at a loose end. He is thirty-two and unmarried and does not know what he is going to do in future, how he is going to spend his life. At present he is just travelling.

All this, and much more, he tells Kate. His name is Jeffrey. She listens to everything he says sympathetically, which encourages him:

Kate listened. Above all, she was a skilled listener. While he talked she wondered whether she was going to decide to go to bed with him or not. She exchanged in imagination ribald remarks with Mary . . . She must consider, honestly, the place infidelity had had in the successful and satisfactory marriage of the Michael Browns. (TSBD 69,70)

There follows several anecdotes about Michael’s peccadilloes. It appears that he too is rather like Mary Finchley. He has love-affairs in an
entirely casual manner just like her. They are no threats to her married life for they are brief affairs, casual on both sides. At first she did not understand this and used to be hurt and used to lose her peace of mind. Now she has become used to them. But an intangible yet inestimable thing has gone out of their marriage. She had lost the esteem, the respect, she used to have for him. His stature has diminished in her eyes. She feels disheartened about this, yet she knows that she should not:

It was unworldly, it was unsophisticated, it was ungenerous. She knew what Mary would say if she told her: that it didn’t matter. But she did feel like this. She wasn’t going to pretend that she felt anything different . . . her Michael had trivial affairs by the dozen with anybody he could? (TSBD 73)

But this casual intimacy with Jeffrey, just then, comes to nothing. She, however, is sure that she likes him. He is more than ten years younger than her. But, lying in bed, before she sleeps, she thinks favorably if him.

That night she has her third dream of the seal. In this dream she sees a turtle as well. Then she thinks that she must save the seal and cannot see it anywhere. This dream is rather odd because in it she is anxious about the seal and cannot find it.

Next day the delegates had to depart and she helped them in doing so. At night she is free and she spends it with Jeffrey. They plan to go to Spain for the month of August. A different phase of her life is going to begin now.
The third chapter, The Holiday begins after the conference is over. It is the thirty-first of July and Kate leaves the hotel in Istanbul, the world of busy affluence in which she had been living since the beginning of summer. She, with Jeffrey, her young lover, is now on the way to Spain.

They put up in a hotel at Malaga where they are recognized for what they are: a couple indulging in illicit love-affair. But their first night in the hotel is spent in an unexpected way. Jeffrey is too ill for love-making. They do not know what is wrong with him. He is not even running a temperature. But he is definitely too unwell for anything but sleep. So she sits, watching over him, just as she used to watch over her children. She sits and thinks. She remembers her past life and meditates over some incidents. In doing this she remembers a certain incident when during breakfast, Tim had suddenly flared up. At that time she had been merely surprised, but now she has other thoughts. She realizes that she had been too dominating with him. This makes her review her married life from the very beginning, from the days when Michael had been courting her. She thinks of all that she had learnt from her married life:

As for Kate, she was acquiring hard-to-come-by virtues, self-disciplines... with three small children and then four, she had to fight for qualities that had not been even in her vocabulary: Patience. Self-discipline self control. Self-abnegation. Chastity. Adaptability to others – this above all. This always. (TSBD 102)
But, then, she realizes that as time went on, as years passed and the children grew older, they had come to resent the very qualities that had made them a happy, well-organized family. They had come to look upon her with contemptuous indulgence, as one looks upon and old retainer. There is pitiless analysis of her position in the family:

Mother was an uncertain quantity. She was like an old nurse who had given her years to the family and must now be put up with. The virtues had turned to vices . . . an unafraid young creature had been turned, through the long, grinding process of always, always being at other people’s beck and call, always having to give out attention to detail . . . into an obsessed maniac. (TSBD 105)

The meditations go on for a few more pages. In fact the entire thing takes no less than twelve pages. It can be guessed how many thoughts there are, how many reminiscences, how many passages of self-realization and self criticism go into these twelve pages. She realizes of course that she had needed to assert her independences from her family, but she realizes it only now. She had not realized it before. As she thinks, she had needed a springboard. The job at Global Food had provided this springboard. She can now assert herself. And that is what she is doing now. Instead of meekly going home she is enjoying a holiday with a lover younger than herself, away in Spain, with her own money. She has shaken herself free of her family.

Thus she sits on the balcony, thinking and thinking, the whole night through. When the sun rises she goes into the room. Jeffrey is still very ill.
He goes into the bathroom – and vomits. He is so ill that he is hardly aware of her and collapses on the bed. She feels maternal towards him. Finally she lies down and falls asleep.

At once she starts dreaming about the seal. This is the fourth of these dreams. Unlike the third, this is a long one. She dreams that there is a house to which she carries the seal. There is a young man in the house and they make love. But her sense of responsibility for the seal makes her get up and leave him after some time.

In this dream it is clear that her compassion and her sense of responsibility is overwhelmingly strong. Even the delights of love cannot hold her back from her duty:

She left the fair young man who was a nobleman of some kind, perhaps a prince, saying, “I am sorry, I want to stay with you, but I must take the seal to the sea first.” (TSBD 113)

Then she wakes up. Jeffrey is awake by this time and they make love. After this they go to have breakfast. She realizes that Jeffrey should consult a doctor but she also realized that he would resent the very suggestion and so she does not say anything about it. Finally he himself admits that he is ill, but, instead of consulting a doctor, goes to a medicine shop and buys a lot of medicine on his own. Then he says that they will board a bus and go into the interior of Spain, away from the cities, to a village he knows. So they start on this journey. Jeffrey is so ill that he can hardly speak. He sleeps all the way. At midnight the end of the journey. It is a small village
where they put up at a hotel. The hotel is a small one, very different from the ones she had been putting up in when in Global Food. They enter names on the register as separate persons, not as a married couple. Now, this is a traditional village, where they still have certain moral standards. So the hotel manager, knowing them for illicit lovers, does not approve of them.

Once more Jeffrey is too ill to eat and she tells him clearly that he needs a doctor. But he refuses. In the morning again he feels better and proposes they should go to Granada. But it is too far off, so they decide to go to Alicante instead. Jeffrey again sleeps throughout the journey and they reach their destination in the afternoon. Yet they continue the journey, with him getting worse and worse. Finally they reach the village to which Jeffrey had originally wanted to go. Here they go into a hotel where Kate says that they are husband and wife and that her husband is ill. The manager is very helpful. But, as he says, it is a small village and they do not have a doctor there, let alone any medicine. The doctor lives twenty miles away and comes very rarely. There is a convent nearby where the nuns look after the diseased villagers. Senor Martinez the owner of the hotel is very sympathetic and he is sure that Jeffrey will be better in the morning. He reassures her. The next day – the forenoon is spent normally but in the afternoon Jeffrey is worse and takes to bed. So they stay in the hotel, waiting for the doctor. She dreams of the seal again. This is the fifth dream but very little is told about it.
Next morning, thinking that Jeffrey has got jaundice, for which good nursing is necessary, Senor Martinez persuades Kate to send him to the convent. She agrees and he is taken there.

Now Kate has nothing to do, so pages and pages of self-criticism and of introspection follow. Here she is shown as missing her home, missing her family, as still dependent on them emotionally:

She was wanting her home, her life in it – which was the past, of course . . . She was longing for her husband.

Her condition up to the time she had left her home in May, the constant swings of emotion from needful love to irritation at her need . . . had passed now into a passion of desire . . . She longed for her husband. (TSBD 139)

This might not be very feministic. In fact many feminists will look at it with scorn, but this is psychologically sound. In fact Lessing shows herself as a good portrayer of character in portraying Kate’s hunger for home. She has, from the beginning, shown Kate as a traditional homemaker. Had she became thoroughly independent all of a sudden, then that would not have been convincing. This hankering for home and her husband is quite in keeping with her character. It makes her a three-dimensional, fully rounded-out human being.

She realizes that she has arrived at a turning-point in her life. This job as a translator, and later as an organizer, at Global Food has brought
about a changes not only in her personality, in her lifestyle, but in the course that her life will henceforward be taking:

The future was not going to be a continuation of the immediate past, with this summer seeming in retrospect like an unimportant hiatus . . . All those years were now seeming like a betrayal of what she really was . . . all that time she had been holding in her hand something else, something precious, offering it in vain to her husband to her children, to everyone she knew –but it had never been taken, had not been noticed. (TSBD 140)

This sense of not being appreciated, not been valued as she really should have been there earlier also. But now it is realized, it is formulated, much more pointedly.

She meets a nun while she walks and this produces another train of thought in her. Nuns choose voluntarily to shut themselves up in a cloister. It is no hardship for them, it is what they really want she compares her condition with that of the nun. She too had voluntarily chosen an enclosed life, cloistered life, cloistered within her family, her home.

That night the doctor came at last and diagnosed Jeffrey’s illness as typhoid. The nurses said they will continue to look after him. The next morning they say it is not typhoid, but neither do they confirm jaundice as had been thought earlier. Two days pass like this. She visits Jeffrey and talks with him. She takes walks by herself in the village. Then one day she dreams of the seal again. This time it is during the day when she lies down after lunch that she has the dream.
This time the dream she has located in an area, down the ground level, with seats rising tier after tier on all sides. Then suddenly wild animals are released into the arena. She takes the seal and runs up the tiers of seats with it. It is terrible, because it seems she will never be able to escape from the animals. Then gradually the wild animals are left behind and gradually they vanish. The dream ends as abruptly as it began. It is the sixth dream.

By now it is a week that Jeffrey has been in the convent. It is clear that he does not have typhoid or jaundice. It is not sure what disease he is suffering from but he is running a temperature and cannot travel. Kate visits him regularly, sometimes twice a day. He becomes well enough to recognize her, which he had not before. They have friendly talks, not like that of lovers. From time to time his fever grows and goes down again.

Then a day comes when she herself falls ill. She realizes that she has fallen ill just like Jeffrey. It is not a different disease, but the same as his. Then, at night, she has her seventh dream of the seal. It is just a dream in which she carrying the seal, in a wintry landscape, towards the sea that is all. It begins and ends abruptly.

Then she realizes that since her illness is just like Jeffrey’s, it is going to be a long-drawn-out process. She might end up in the convent for an indefinite duration of time. So she decides to go away. She realizes that going away, leaving Jeffrey there will not be a good action, but also that no
purpose will be serve by her staying there either. Besides, he is being well looked-after:

While up to this minute it had seemed impossible to leave Jeffrey alone, an act of coldness or of irresponsibility, now she was saying to herself that he was after all, a man of thirty, that he would continue to live and probably even prosper, if she were not waiting at the hotel to sit with him once or twice a day for an hour-which in any case she could no longer do. (TSBD146)

So she writes a regretful letter to him, and prepares to leave the village. She boards a bus and soon arrives at the nearest city. Then she takes a plane and arrives in London. There she puts up at a hotel and she says that she is ill. She does not want to go to a hospital. So she stays at the hotel where a doctor attends her and there are girls who take care of her. After a few days she gets better and starts on the job of making herself presentable for not only has she grown physically weak because of her illness, but, naturally, her appearance has also deteriorated till she has become unrecognizable. Then again she dreams. She dreams of the house in which she had made love to a young nobleman and laid down the seal. This is a long dream in which she dances with the king and a lot of other young men and women. The seal is not actually present in this dream, but she is conscious of it presence somewhere, unseen by her. It is her eighth dream, in which the seal is not present. In this it is like the fourth dream. As a matter of fact this seems to be a continuation of the fourth dream in which
she had gone into the same house as described here and made love to the same young man.

After this dream she finds that she is not as well as she had thought herself to be. The doctor comes again and tells that she does not have jaundice or typhoid but perhaps a variety of influenza. So she lies down and rests and it is the middle of September before she can get up.

When she does get up she goes to have a look at her house. She is so thin and unkempt that nobody recognizes her and she too does not make herself known. Even Mary Finchley, though she looks at her, does not recognize her. She takes her for a tramp and passes on. Oddly enough, Kate does not feel hurt or offended. On the contrary, she is elated. It is as though she had become invisible:

She was repeating: They looked right through me. They didn’t know me. Far from being saddened by it, she was delighted. She felt quite drunk with relief that friendship, ties, “knowing people” were so shallow, easily disproved. (TSBD168)

After a few days she goes out to find a room which she can rent till October when her children and her husband will be coming back. She finds one and takes it. The flat is owned by a girl named Maureen who, in every way, is the exact opposite of her. She is young, unmarried and absolutely without any sense of housekeeping or of neatness. When she is hungry she just opens a carton of baby food, of which she has an inexhaustible supply, and eats it. Though she is the owner of the flat and Kate is her tenant she
takes no care of her. Kate has to do everything herself. Here a completely
different life starts for her. It is not clear what Maureen does, whether she is
a student or has any job. She has a succession of young men coming to the
flat with whom she goes out every day.

Then she has her dream about the seal. She is still carrying it, going
in search of water. This dream is mentioned briefly, in just one sentence. It
is not described in detail.

Then she has long talks with Maureen. They tell each other about
themselves. Maureen, particularly, asks her about married life. She has two
serious suitors. But she is afraid to Marry and shoulder all the
responsibilities of married life. This is the time that Kate starts
experimenting with her glamour and charm.

She dyes her hair and dresses nicely and goes out for a walk in the
park. She realizes that she is attracting attention-all the men are looking at
her. Then she comes into her room, puts on an unattractive dress, makes her
posture, her hair, ungainly, and walks out again. This time no one pays her
any attention. She thinks of herself:

A woman walking in a sagging dress, with a heavy walk, and her hair-this
above all-not conforming to the prints made by fashion, is not “set” to
attract men’s sex. The same woman in a dress cut in this or that way,
walking with her inner thermostat set just so- and click, she’s fitting the
pattern. (TSBD 205)
Then Maureen talks to her about Philip, who wants to marry her. But she cannot make up her mind. He will be coming to supper and she walks Kate to meet him. He comes and is seen to be a serious and sober person who can see Maureen’s faults and still wants to marry her. He also has strong political convictions and belongs to an organization called the young Front which it turns to joined to another, called the British League of Action. It is a half-communist, half-fascist organization. It is in favour of destroying and discarding much that is there in the present system of government, and then rebuilding it. The women are not interested. Then in order to support his theory he takes them out of see a procession where disgruntled people are agitating. But both of them realize that he has no concrete plan.

Kate tells Maureen about her dream of the seal. She ends in a very negative way, uncertain of everything:

I don’t know how far ahead the sea is. If there is any sea. I’m full of fear I am walking the wrong way after all. Perhaps I’ll never find the open water the seal needs. Perhaps it’s all ice and snow and dark always, for ever, there is no end to it-Perhaps I and the seal will fall into the snow and never get up again. (TSBD 232)

Maureen realizes that the dream is very important to her and tells her that she will have to finish the dream. But naturally it does not depend upon her - she cannot control her dreams. Then there come a few pages where Kate experiments with her “inner thermostat” It is a curious passage. It
would have been comic had it not been so serious. There are some labourers working in a corner she dresses unattractively and stands there:

Kate realized that she was standing still, staring; had been for some minutes. The men took no notice of her. . . . She walked away out of sight, and there, took off her jacket, Maureen’s-showing her fitting dark dress. She tied her hair dramatically with a scarf. Then she strolled back in front of the workmen, hips conscious of themselves. A storm of whistles, calls, invitations. Out of sight the other way, she made her small transformation and walked back again: the men glanced at her, did not see her . . .

. . . She made the transit again, as a sex object . . . Kate arrived beside Maureen and said, ”And that’s what it is all worth. (TSBD 242-243)

All this is aimed at making Kate realizes that this is what she has been doing all these days-presenting different faces to the world. Only, she had been doing it unconsciously, adapting herself to the demands of circumstances. It is as if she has no definite personality of her own. She had been very adaptable. She understood what her surroundings demanded. This is what had made her such a success in whatever she did. She used to take pride in it. But that is not the case any longer. Now her very virtue she sees as a vice. She is ashamed of herself.

Why this is so is not made clear. What is clear is just that she is angry with herself for having been adaptable so far. Yet, according to all standards is that adaptability is a virtue. Perhaps it goes against the feminist idea that Lessing wants to propagate: a woman should have independence of spirit, she should not give in to circumstances. This, if this is her
intention, is a very highly debatable idea. If any person, be he a man or be she a woman, never considers her surroundings, but, in a defiant spirit, acts absolutely independently of his or her surroundings, then there would be anarchy in society. This is not desirable, whether one is a feminist or not. Yet this is what Lessing seems to be advocating, at least in this particular passage. But this may not be her final opinion.

Then she once more dreams of the seal. This is after an interval of many days. She had dreamt of the seal when she first came to Maureen’s flat. That was some days ago. Now she dreams of it again and this is the eleventh dream.

This is a rather pessimistic dream. It is not that the other dreams had been hopeful ones, but this is more pessimistic than most. In this dream she has the feeling that the seal is dead. She is traveling northwards, in a wintry landscape. There is no sun. It is a dark, snowbound world she is in, without any hope of sunshine.

Directly after this she tells Maureen about Mary Finchley. This has already been referred to in the earlier pages of this chapter. Lessing has given the picture, in Mary Finchley, of a woman who has no sense of morality or of duty or of responsibility. Whether such a woman ever existed is very doubtful. Lessing gives many circumstantial details to support her picture but all the same, the realism of such character is of a very doubtful quality. One finds it difficult to imagine such a woman. She is more like an
animal than a human being. She is the exact opposite of Kate. Kate is devoted to her family and Mary does not take any care of her family. Kate had been loyal to her husband though he had not, till she met Jeffrey. Kate did not bother about her personal appearance, whether she appeared attractive to men in general or not. Mary used to dress like a young girl. Above everything else, Mary was a highly promiscuous woman. She had love-affairs at the drop of a hat and as quickly forgot about them. She had absolutely no sense of morality or guilt at all:

If she goes shopping and she fancies a man and there’s an opportunity, there you are. She never thinks about it again. All the time, when she was pregnant, when she was nursing. When I ask her about it she says, oh, I can’t do with just one man! She had never been in love in her life . . . Once she seduced my husband . . . She fancied him and so she had him . . . I’ve never been able to conclude anything from it, except that she is quite different from me. (TSBD 249,252)

This account of Mary’s character is quite long, nearly five pages. It is difficult to know why such a character is sketched at all, unless it is to serve as a foil to Kate. It is also difficult to explain the portrayal of this character from the feminist viewpoint. It is the opposite of Kate’s own character.

Directly after this exposition Kate has another dream about the seal. The seal is not present in the dream, but Kate thinks of it. It is present through her thoughts of
it, her memory. It is a wintry landscape and the snow falls steadily. In front of her there is a beautiful cherry-tree in full bloom and she pulls out a spray from it.

A few days later she and Maureen go together to the zoo. They want to have a look at real seal. So they go to the pool where the seals are kept. They watch them playing in the water. Then while they are wandering about in the zoo Maureen announces her decision to marry Philip. She has, after much painstaking deliberation, made up her mind. It has taken her long to decide, but at last she is sure.

The same night Kate has her last dream of the seal. It is the thirteenth dream and the last. Perhaps her visit to the zoo and the aquarium of seals has something to do with it, Lessing does not tell us anything about that. This is an entirely hopeful dream. First of all, there is no anxiety in her mind about the seal. This is because she feels that it is full of life and full of hope. She cannot carry it any longer, it is so heavy. So she drags it over the snow. But it is no longer dark and snowing. A warm breeze is blowing and a breath of salt air comes to her. Then she sees that the snow is gone, that she is walking over soft and green grass. This grass, moreover, is starred about with flowers. Then there is a slope. As she climbs the slope, there is the sea, sparkling under a sunny sky, in front of her. All around, many seals are there, basking in the sun.
She takes the seal to the water and puts it in the sea. In the sea there are many seals, swimming and playing. Her seal goes in among them. She can no longer identify it. Then she sees it:

A seal swam past her that had scars on its flanks and its back, and Kate thought that this must her seal, whom she had carried through so many perils. But it did not look at her now. Her journey was over. She saw that the sun was in front of her, not behind . . . She looked at it, a large, light, brilliant, buoyant, tumultuous sun that seemed to sing. She turned, knowing that she had finished the dream. She woke. (TSBD 266-267)

Finishing the dream gives her the sense of having achieved something. Maureen too feels the same. So now she rings up her home and tells her daughter that she will be returning home the next day.

Maureen tells her that she is going to have a party and invites her to it. Then Kate goes out to buy presents for her children. While shopping she sees herself reflected in windows. She notices that in these few months (six months actually) her face has aged. Her hair is not all right. It will have to be restyled.

Now she realizes how much depends on her hair. By restyling it she might look young and by keeping it as it is she might look aged. It is for her to choose which it is to be. So she goes back to Maureen and makes it clear to her:

I’ve made a discovery. Going back home, the way I’m going to make statements - though I’m not sure what about; but my area of choice — do you know what I mean? – well, it’s narrowed down to how I do my hair. It seems to me as if little bits of me are distributed among my family,
Tim’s bit, Michael’s bit, Eileen’s piece—and soon. Or rather, were
distributed. That’s over. But to you I can say anything. (TSBD 270-271)

But, in spite of saying this, it is not clear whether she has it dressed
or not. To the end it is not made clear. She is making a definite statement
whether she dresses it or not. It has become crucial to her. If it is that
important then Lessing should make it clear what it is that she chooses to
do. But there is no indication. Perhaps Lessing deliberately leaves it to the
reader to think whatever she likes.

Likewise, it is not clear what Maureen is going to do. Making a
choice between Philip and William as husband was extremely important to
her. A few pages earlier she had declared to Kate that she had decided to
marry Philip. But as the party gets going she is in William’s embrace who
asks her to marry him. She gives an evasive answer. So it is not clear whom
she is finally going to marry. She is still unable to make up her mind. The
company of Kate over the past weeks has not helped her to come to a
decision. The last sentence that refers to her in the book presents her in the
embrace of William with Philip looking at them; “And there stood Philip
watching them both; and the girl jealously watching Philip.” (TSBD-273)

While they are engrossed in each other and the party is in full swing,
Kate slips out of the house, suitcase in hand, to go home. No one notices
her leaving. The book comes to an end, not telling us what appearance Kate
wants to present to her family (thermostat set high with her hair dressed or
the opposite), and what Maureen is going do – which man she is going to marry or whether she is going to marry at all. All is kept indefinite.

It has been possible to analyze this novel in such detail as it is a comparatively short one. The two books studied before this, *Children of Violence* and *The Golden Notebook* were both too long to make this possible. *The Golden Notebook* is the amalgamation of several novels into one, though Lessing has deliberately tried to give it a tight knit form whereas the first is a series – novel written over two decades so it is neither fair nor possible to judge it as a unit. But this novel rewards that kind of study.

As far as form goes, it is more or less neatly constructed, being divided into five parts which are entitled:

1. At Home
2. Global Food
3. The Holiday
4. The Hotel
5. Maureen’s Flat.

Of these the third part, The Holiday is the longest and the fourth, The Hotel, the shortest. This is somewhat unexpected, as the part concerned with Global Food could have been expected to be the longest. The Hotel is justifiably short, since it is concerned with only the three weeks of her illness when she stays at a hotel.
Lessing had said, with reference to *The Four-Gated City* in particular, that it was a bildungs–roman. That, with modification, can be said of this novel also. For the traditional bildungs–roman it is necessary that (a) there should be a perceptible growth in the hero, the novel is actually the story of this growth, and (b) the hero should face alternatives and make choices, and thus the growth should come. This was the traditional theory of this type of novel. Goethe, however, had a different idea. He visualized an inner, organic growth in the hero for a youth is perceptibly, and naturally, different from the man he grows into.

Taking both of these concepts into account, it can be said that this novel is a modified form of the bildungs–roman, though it should be pointed out that Lessing has followed, more or less, the traditional idea and not the Goethean idea. It can be said, even more emphatically of this novel than of *Children of Violence* that:

> Though images of entrapment, of change without change, and finally, of growth, conversion and evolution, Lessing develops a metaphorical apologia for her concept of self–development. (Bloom Harold 145,146)

This is exactly what Lessing does in this book. The book may be called a modified form of the bildungs–roman first of all because here instead of a young boy’s growth into manhood we have a mature woman’s mental growth into enlightened maturity, and secondly because throughout the novel she faces several choices and makes decisions on her own. The
most important of these choices are two: (a) choice to join Global Food (b) choice to go on a pleasure trip with Jeffrey as her lover. Besides these two important choices there are numerous other choices that also show her growing maturity, like (a) decision to continue working not as a translator but as an organizer (b) decision to leave Jeffrey in the convent and go home (c) decision to leave the hotel at Bloomsbury and rent Maureen’s flat. So it is a modified form of the bildungs – roman.

Moreover, it is a feminist one as well, because other such novels have all had young men heroes, not women. *Sons and lovers, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which are taken as typical examples of this kind of novel, have heroes, not heroines. This novels is the story of Kate Brown’s development. The writer leaves us in no doubt that it is the mental development of a woman that she is interested in. From the first few pages of the novel this fact is clear. She sketches her in as a woman on the brink of middle age, married, with four children. A homely woman. Then she shows this woman introspecting, making several choices and developing continuously. Like her other novels, this too is entirely a feminist novel. No quotations are needed here to illustrate this point, since many have already been given in the course of the study foregoing this.

Thus the theme of the novel also gives the genre of the novel. As to the narrative strategy, it is a mixture of many different techniques. There is
plain third person narration; “The woman returned to her back step, leaned against the wall, and folded her arms again.” (TSBD 05)

Mixed with this there is the authorial comment which is peculiar to the omniscient narrator technique:

Sometime, if you are lucky, a process, or a stage, does get concentrated,
It was going to turn out for Kate that summer would be such a shortened, heightened, concentrated him. (TSBD 8)

Memory flashbacks are used throughout the novel. One of the first of these occurs when her knowledge of Portuguese is being explained. She was herself half—Portuguese:

It had happened that she had finished school early . . . She spent a year in Lorenzo Marques with her grandfather, who was a scholar. There she spoke only Portuguese. (TSBD 16)

When she is introspecting, first person narration is used. This is used very seldom, and there are but one or two sentences given in the first person, quickly followed by ordinary third person narration.

One of the important narrative strategies used in the novel is the technique of allegorical dreams. There are thirteen of these meaningful dreams, each full of challenge, each a manifestation of the noble, human qualities of mankind, compassion, courage, endurance, striving and hopefulness. These have been already discussed. It is significant that when the dreams, which come in a series, in chronological order, come to a hopeful, successful end, she too reaches the final decision to go home, about which she had been doubtful before this. She decides to go home that very day. What the seal signifies is not made clear by the author. It is a
symbol of multiple significance. It might have a simple down-to-earth meaning and it might have several meanings on the allegorical level. All these have already been explained at the time when the first dream was explained. It is a very important narrative strategy that gives a symbolic depth to the novel. There are a few other symbols used in the book, for example the broken cup kept at the fountain in the square in front of the hotel where they had put up in Spain, and the doll Maureen makes out of the hair she cuts from her head in the last chapter of the book. These too have multiple significance. But they do not add to the action or influence Kate in any way. They have only incidental importance. As for portrayal of characters, there is hardly anyone of importance besides the towering figure of Kate herself. She is portrayed, in detail, as a multiple-faceted personality. All this has been explained in detail while analyzing the book. Every facet of her personality has been given by Lessing in meticulous detail. It is noticeable, however, that she does not tell us which personality Kate chooses to adopt right at the end, the attractive one or the homely one.

From the feminist point of view, one other aspect of her personality is very important. It has been pointed out with the heroines of the other books that they, in the process of developing themselves, recognizing their own selves, also help their male partners towards a like self-realization. This is a definite and valuable contribution of Lessing to the theory of
feminism. It has happened again and again in the past, in the books that have been studied in the thesis as well as in some that have been left out.

It is most significant that nothing like that happens in this novel. Kate’s character lacks this quality of enhancing those of others. This is particularly true of Jeffrey and Maureen, with both of whom she becomes intimate. Jeffrey is ill for ninety-nine per cent of the time he is with her, so there is some excuse for his quiescence. But about Maureen it is more difficult to say. She is a young impressionable girl, less old than the youngest of Tim, Kate’s son. She is very friendly with Kate who tells her everything about herself. It is only natural that she too should be influenced for the better by Kate. But this does not happen. In the simpler matters of domestic life she does not improve even though she has the example of Kate before her. In the deeper matter of making a choice between her two suitors, or deciding whether she is going to marry at all, she is not influenced by Kate either way. The writer could easily have made Kate influence her for the better, but she deliberately refrains from doing so. Why Lessing takes this attitude is difficult to understand. It is not that she had not yet developed this particular aspect of feminism when she wrote this book, for both *The Four-Gated City* and *The Golden Notebook* in which the heroine has this redeeming influence on her male partner were written before this novel. Therefore in this novel the reader should expect a development of the theme or at least a repetition. But nothing like that
happens. The two characters with whom Kate becomes the most intimate do not undergo any change because of association with her. One has to seek for an explanation of this.

It seems as though, in this book Lessing wants to convey the message of the importance of non-interference to us. Again and again she tells us how Kate refrains from advising Maureen. It is not that Maureen does not ask for friendly advice. She does so again and again, but Kate refuses every time. It is as though she wants Maureen to take a decision herself, independent of anyone’s advice and influence. But Lessing does not show her taking any decision. Just as Jeffrey remains uninfluenced so does Maureen. The only one in the book who makes any choice, takes any decision, is the heroine herself. She chooses to go back to her former life. Whether this is a retrogressive step or not it is for the reader to decide.

As for the other characters, they are too shadowy or fragmentary to need analysis. The only one other important character is Maureen. As must have become clear from the analysis of the novel, she is portrayed as a feckless character, without any element of discipline in her. It is a wonder that two young men want to marry her. She is a most undomesticated creature. She lacks even the rudiments of home making instincts of neatness, of responsibility. She does not want to marry because she does not want to shoulder the responsibilities of married life. Even after associating with Kate she does not learn anything. But in justice to Lessing
it must be said that she does not show all the members of the younger generation to be as hopeless as Maureen.

The only male character who deserves mention at all is Jeffrey. He is shown as an irresponsible play boy, a man-about-town. It is not that he is not a credible figure. He is a fully realistic character. But he is quite a minor character. He comes in only for one chapter in which he talks a little at first and then falls ill. He continues to be ill till Kate leaves him and then is no more heard of. Even then, he is present for at least one chapter. He serves the purpose of showing the reader that. Kate has developed enough independence of spirit to choose a lover and leave him. Lessing has brought him in only for this purpose. Apart from this he does not serve any other purpose.

There is one other character, who, to say the very last, is an odd, a peculiar character. She is not even present in the book actually, except for just a page or two when she does absolutely nothing. This is Mary Finchley, Kate’s neighbor and friend. Throughout the book she is referred to again and again. Mary anecdotes are told about her. Her character is explained and analyzed. But she does not play any part either in the action or in Kate’s mental development. She is present through Kate’s memory.

She is actually, physically present in the book only once. This is when Kate, after having recovered from her illness in the hotel at Bloomsbury, goes to have a look at her house. She is haggard after her
illness, and badly dressed. She stands outside her house and she has changed so much that no one recognizes her, not even Mary. She comes out of her house, glances disinterestedly at Kate, and goes in. This is the only time she is present in the book, for a few moments.

Needless to say, she does not contribute to the action at all. But, as analyzed before this, this character is present throughout the novel in Kate’s memory. Kate analyses her character the most thoroughly to Maureen. Mary is seen almost as a counterpart of Maureen. Only Maureen, however improbable she is, is a more credible character. One feels that such a person might, possible exist. One does not feel that about Mary. She is a totally implausible character. One thinks of her only in negatives. She has no sense of family, or of morality, or of responsibility. It is difficult to fabricate such a character. In every way, she is the exact opposite of Kate. In fact this is the purpose she serves; she is a foil to Kate. Technically speaking she is anomalous because she actually serves no function in the novel, nor is she a credible character.

The theme of the novel, as has been said when discussing the genre, is the development of the central character, Kate. Here, as has been already pointed out we have a woman on the verge of middle age. So the novel concerns itself with her mental development. She is already a mature woman. What she has to do is to grow gradually into middle age, accepting it and accommodating herself to it. From the very beginning—the first page
in fact—this process of growth is shown. Her mind undergoes many changes. All these are faithfully portrayed.

What is important in this respect is that she makes many choices in the course of the novel and these choices contribute not only to the development of the theme and its complexity, but to the action as well. Throughout the novel, stress is laid again and again upon her thoughts, and these naturally influence her choices. In the first few pages, while she makes coffee, she comes to the following conclusions, fit for a mature adult:

We are what we learn.
It often takes a long and painful time.
Unfortunately, there was no doubt, too, that a lot of time, a lot of pain, went into learning very little… (TSBD 7).

These are the thoughts of a very mature mind. Then, going on thinking, she realizes that in her daily life she has hardly ever had the chance to choose her course of action. Her decisions had always been ruled by the circumstances. Then comes her first chance to choose. She has to choose whether to join Global Food or not. This is not ruled by the circumstances. She is really free to choose. So she chooses to join. After this first decision the rest comes easy. She discovers that she has an inner aptitude for this kind of work and she chooses to continue the work, shifting to the organizational side. So here we have a significant growth in her personality—she who was a very good housewife, which demands a
great deal of organizing capacity and this, she discovers, can be extended into doing her job properly and efficiently. Not only that she discovers that she has become a fashionable and attractive woman. This adds to the growth of her personality, for she never used to pay much attention to her appearance before she joined this job:

What could be more useful than to work for Global Food? Then she would nourish and nurture in herself that person, which was all warmth and charm... the warm brown eyes, the cared-for skin, the heavy curves of her dark-red hair. (TSBD 53)

The next important development of her personality comes when she decides to take a holiday with Jeffrey as her lover. She has many hours of meditation and self-analysis before she actually decides, because of her innate sense of morality. Her husband is a promiscuous person. He is continually having affairs and she knows about it. So the question of fidelity, of loyalty is not really of paramount importance. Then, in addition, the affluent, multinational world she is now in habitually does not look upon love-affairs with any strict disfavor. It is almost natural for them all to sleep with one another. She finds that she too can be casual:

This affair, staring her in the face, certainly would not be a question of delicate emotions and rare anguish. This youth was too old. He was too worldly. He was too self-critical. (TSBD 75)

After this she goes off on a pleasure-trip with him which is entirely spoilt by his illness. Then she herself falls ill and leaves him there. This action shows a further development of her personality, for she has learnt
that she cannot be responsible for everyone, that she comes across. It is not possible.

Then she comes into contact with Maureen. Here another aspect—she learns non-interference. She refrains from giving her advice as she might have done earlier. The dreams, thirteen in all, about the seal also indicate the nobility of her nature as has been repeatedly pointed out in different contexts. It is only when she has taken the seal to the sea that she feels fulfilled and free.

This look at the theme has taken some time because in this novel the theme influences all the different aspects of this novel its genre, its five-part structure, its characterization. In no other novel of hers is the theme so crucial.

Taking everything into consideration, this is a highly successful novel. Kate is a woman, mature and efficient, but bound by traditions and conventions. As the novel goes on we find her questioning the social norms that she had accepted without any thought up till now, and finally shaking them off. In the end she deliberately chooses to go back to the family life she has analyzed and found and established her identity. Just before the publication of this novel Doris Lessing had said in an interview that she had always been specially interested by women whose world was their married life only. So here she takes such a woman, pitchforks her into completely alien surroundings and makes a universal figure of her.
Works Cited

