Conclusion

Now that we have studied, however fragmentarily, the major works of Doris Lessing, namely, the novel series Children of Violence, The Golden Notebook and The summer Before the Dark, the time has come to sum up the conclusions reached by this study, of both Lessing the feminist and Lessing the novelist. In fact, the two are inseparable from each other, so harmonious is the relationship between the two. All the same, the question of her being a feminist arises because she herself has refused to have any label stuck on her, taking pride in the fact that she presents a front that is difficult to categorize. All the same, since it is the contention of this thesis that she is a feminist, all these matters have to be sifted.

The Nobel Prize committee, that awarded her the prize for literature in 2007, (she being the eleventh woman recipient of the prize out of a total of a hundred and four such) had refused to categories her under any head.

But, then, this description is not really as non-committal as it seems to be on the surface. Here the stress falls on the revealing phrase “female experience” and this definitely argues for her being a feminist. Particularly a second wave feminist. But, then, just as much of a claim may be made in favour of her being a communist, a Sufi, and a science fiction writer. This last aspect has not been at all discussed in the present thesis. But all the three works, Children of Violence, The Golden Notebook and The Summer Before the Dark have communist elements (and The Four-Gated City has Sufi elements) in them. Therefore they have to be discussed.

Again and again in her works we find a strong sense of commitment to the communist cause. She had herself become a member of the communist party herself. In the novels discussed, at least the first two of them, both the heroines,
Martha Quest and Anna Wulf, become active members of the Communist party. But these are only the two books taken up in this thesis. Her commitment has been there right from the beginning. Thus in one of her earliest works she says:

In this book I have made various statements about the possibility of Communism becoming democratic. . . . the great words liberty, freedom and truth have again become banners for men to fight under. (Quoted by Gindin James 9)

Her heroine Martha Quest, as has been pointed out, was being brought up in a highly restricted society, that of colonized Africa. She not only wants to establish an identity of her own, but she also wants to break the bondage of this restricted colonial society on one hand, and to bring freedom and enlightenment in the African world that lies beyond colonial society. Early in World War II she joins the Communist party, just as Lessing herself had done. Her attitude to Marxism at that time was one of hope and almost entirely uncritical optimism. This idealistic vision is seen at its best in the following extract.

Communism . . . was a great, marvelous vision. . . . it was a vision of a society; where every individual was immensely important. . . . Every person had a chance and the right to develop himself. This was the dream, and it’s why people are socialists, why people are socialists, why I was. (M.Rambhau Badode16)

Her real life attachment to the party did not last for long. Actually she was a member of the group for only three years. The Children of Violence series depicts family patterns that have similarities with the Marxist theories of family patterns. These depend on the patriarchal system of society, the socially prevalent doctrine of division of labour. These in turn led to an authoritarian family structure, with the head of the family as the ruler of the family. This is to be founded in Martha’s own family as well as in the surrounding families. Yet, at the time when this was written Marxism, in Lessing’s mind, was almost
identified with humanism as well as materialism. The family pattern, essentially patriarchal and authoritarian, did not go with this ideal, but people, including Lessing, did not perceive this anomaly.

By the time she came to write The Golden Notebook she had become disillusioned with party politics but not with the theoretical aspect of it. The heroine, Anna Wulf, just like Lessing herself, joins the party with great enthusiasm and then, again like the author herself, leaves it. In her preface to the book Lessing clarifies her attitude to Marxism. She rightly regards it as one of the greatest influences on the world of thought in the early part of the twentieth century, placing it against the proper perspective:

Marxism and its various offshoots has fermented ideas everywhere, and so fast and energetically that, once “way out”, it has already been absorbed, has become part of ordinary thinking. Ideas that were confined to the far left thirty or forty years ago, had pervaded the left generally twenty years ago, and have provided the Commmplaces of conventional social thought from right to left for the last ten years. (TGNB11)

This shows, not the enthusiastic uncritical acceptance of the doctrine but the level-headed mature evaluation of someone who can put the doctrine in perspective and then judge it against a historical background.

Anna Wulf’s joining the group, her experiences there and her gradual and final emergence from its influence can easily be seen to reflect Lessing’s own experiences. They were recorded in the 3rd red notebook as red was the colour of communism and the date Jan. 1950 was given against the first entry. In it Anna joins the party. She is elated by the atmosphere. There is the sense of everyone willingly working together to achieve some definite aim. It is not a haphazard meaningless gathering. Here there are people who are driven, inspired by an ideal shared by all those who come there; “The atmosphere of friendliness, of
people working for a common end. . . I’m, by temperament, "A fellow-traveler." (TGNB151)

But already in the first of these notebooks, two years after joining, she writes that she will have to leave the party.

In the second of the red notebooks she clearly writes of the undercurrents of hostility within the members of the group. On the surface there is good-fellowship and hearty camaraderie, but underneath this cordiality there is jealousy and dissent. The last sentence in it says; “As we separated, the room was full of hostility: We were disliking each other, and knew it.” (TGNB-276)

This entry is dated 11th November, 1952. The next installment of the red notebook (it is the third) is dated 13th November, 1955, that is, three years later. Stalin had died in 1953 and people have started to wonder what is going on in the party organizations, in Russia and in Britain. It is an indefinite attitude, an attitude of questioning. The old days of assertion, of confidence have gone. The party is highly active and Anna is immersed in all its multifarious activities. Yet she is aware of a feeling of futility. She says she has spent weeks and months in a frenzy of activities and has actually achieved nothing. This has produced a feeling, naturally, of frustration in her. Moreover, she is fully aware that she had known from beforehand that all this activity is not going to achieve anything. They all realize that actually nothing can be achieved with the present set-up and come to the conclusion that another, a “really British CP” will have to be prepared. There will be, then, two rival groups. Every day disappointed and disheartened members leave the party:

People are reeling off from the CP in dozens, broken-hearted. The irony is that they are broken-hearted and cynical to the degree that they were loyal and innocent before. People like myself who had few illusions... remain calm and ready to start again, accepting the fact that the British CP will probably slowly
degenerate into a tiny little sect. The new phrase in the air is “rethink the socialist position.” (TGNB 395)

Then we come to the last, the fourth installment, of the red notebook. It contains the story of Harry Matthews, an idealistic teacher, who had dropped his job to fight in Spain. He had got wounded in that war and thereafter devoted himself to the cause of uplifting the poor and the downtrodden. He performed many acts of heroism among them and became a legendary figure among them. This story is offered by and for itself. As to what purpose it is supposed to serve, what it is required to prove, to Anna, it is not made at all clear. It ends abruptly, without any comment from the writer, or by Jimmy, who narrates the story to Anna:

“He’s married the widow at last and she’s pregnant. I don’t know what that proves, if anything.”

(Here a double black line marked the end of the red notebook.) (TGNB 466)

Here the red notebook ends altogether, there is no further installment of it. So Anna’s communist proclivities, how they developed etc. are not clarified. But her political convictions are given in the golden notebook that follows. She has thoughts of the future state of the world:

Sitting there I had a vision of the world with nations, systems, economic blocks, hardening and consolidating; a world where it would become increasingly ludicrous even to talk about freedom or the individual conscience. I know that this sort of vision has been written about, it’s something one has read, but for a moment it wasn’t words, ideas, but something I felt, in the substance of my flesh and nerves, as true. (TGNB 496)

So we can see that this is what Lessing’s political attitude had developed into by the time she finished The Golden Notebook. She began as an admirer of communism, as an active member of the Party, but in the end outgrew
communism. It was a passing phase, not a permanent, enduring state. While it lasted it was a strong one, but it did not last long.

Now it comes the claims of Sufism. This is a much more spurious claim, since it appears only in a very few books. It definitely has a place in her works but it is by no means an important one. Her interest in Sufism can only be called a spurious and totally academic one. It seems to have been a convenient, yet an impressive theory that had supported her own. In an interview she had said: .. I’m not a Sufi, I’m studying it”

How far her studies in this field had progressed is to be gauged by the five-novel series *Canopus* and by *The Four-Gated City* which is the last of the *Children of Violence* series. The fact that it was of passing interest can be made out by the fact that it was not pursued in the novels that came later, like *The Summer Before the Dark*.

A few words about Sufism are necessary, specially about those parts of it that were useful to Lessing, particularly in *The Four-Gated City*.

Sufism is the name given to Islamic mysticism. It is to be doubted whether Lessing had read any of the Sufi saint’s work. Had she read even only one of them, like the great saint Rumi, perhaps her attitude would have been different and her work would have borne the unmistakable stamp of it. One does not get any impression of this kind. It is to be supposed that whatever knowledge of Sufism she had gained was from Idries Shah’s book The Sufis. This is a very convenient book for basic knowledge of the theoretical aspect of Sufism, and it was the theoretical aspect in which our author was interested. It does not give much inkling of the awesome and sublime beauty of the experience of the Sufi mystics. Reading it for true knowledge is not enough. It is as though one strives to learn about Christianity by giving an abridged edition of
Aquinas’s Summa a reading. One cannot get any idea of St. John of cross or of George Herbert. But, then, strictly speaking, all this was not necessary for her.

The part that particularly influenced Lessing was the theory of human development as held in Sufism. Idries Shah calls it “evolution” and says that they believe themselves to be taking part in the higher evolution of humanity (The Sufis - 19)

The basic doctrine of Sufism looks upon the Sufi as an ambassador of God to remind men to humbly accept the truth that all is one. Lessing has given us her interpretation of such a person in two different characters in two different books: Charles Watkins in Briefing for a Descent into Hell and Johor or George Sherban in Shikasta in the Canopus series.

There is the concept of an “inner space” in the human mind in Sufism within which the consciousness of human beings can travel through developing extra-sensory powers, intuition and also dreams. This according to the Sufis, will take humanity onwards in its journey towards perfection, towards higher consciousness:

Sufis believe that . . . humanity is evolving towards a certain destiny. We are all taking part in that evolution . . . The human being’s organism is producing a new complex of organs in response to such a need. . . So essential is more rarefied evolution that our future depends upon it. (The Sufis - 61)

It is known that Lessing, in her personal life, had quite a lot of such extra-sensory perceptions as could not be explained with the help of reason. In order to explain them she turned away from rationalism and took the help of Sufism. Since these were all firsthand experiences she naturally believed in their validity. It is a wonder that she, even after having had these experiences, did not turn to mysticism whole-heartedly but was content to find a theoretical explanation for them and led an ordinary worldly life. Perhaps the experiences
were not mystical ones but just extra-sensory ones. She herself, to do her justice, does not call them mystical experiences. But she believes in the reality and the seriousness and immediacy of them and forcefully declares:

We all have extra-ordinary, non-rational capacities that we use to communicate in a very subtle way. Without these they would be destroyed. (M.Rambhau Badode20)

Paradoxically enough, it is in science-fiction, especially space fiction that Lessing finds appropriate expression of this interest in mysticism. In Martha Quest she shows melancholy giving rise to mystical experiences. But in the real life of ordinary space and time, she finds, it is impossible to solve the problems posited by the world. So she moves to the world of outer space where the laws of ordinary space-time complex are in abeyance. Canopus in Argos: Archives is the five-novel series that is the result of this experiment.

Idries shah explains one of the theories of Sufism as a belief in latent faculties of men that can be developed through mental exercises just as physical faculties can be developed through physical exercises. Sufism, thus, believes in “the transcending of ordinary limitations” of the human mind. He says:

The Sufis claim that a certain kind of mental and other activity can produce, under special conditions and with particular efforts, what is termed a higher working of the mind, leading to special perceptions whose apparatus is latent in the ordinary man. (TWS 14-15)

This concern with developing latent mental faculties however, is not at variance with the ordinary world. Sufism does not reject the worldly life, nor is contemptuous of it. It advocates detachment: “Be in the world, but not of it,” that is the aim of the ideal Sufi.

It is, indeed, the aim of many religions. The best exposition of the philosophy, of course, is in the Gita, which is so well-known as not to need any explanation. But what seems to be a bit puzzling is that it is to be found in
Christianity also. When shah talks about “mental and other activity” involving “particular efforts”, one cannot help thinking of St. Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* in which book he gives explicit instructions about just such exercises. There was actually no need for Lessing to come so far afield to sow her pseudo-mystical wild eats. It was ready to hand at home. But, then, perhaps, she having been a colonial, St. Ignatius was not home ground for her.

Be that as it may, both Sufism and psychoanalysis combined in a curious mixture to give Lessing the concept of a “higher consciousness”, which, according to her, is tapped by artists as well as scientists during moments of inspiration for which there is no logical or scientific explanation. In an interview that she gave to Susan Stemberg she said:

I think that there is this collective mind which writers plug into quite easily, but then so do scientists, who will often say that they get their best ideas, not when they are behaving in a scientific way, but in a more intuitive way

(M.RambhauBadode 22)

More examples of the influence of Sufism on Lessing are to be found in her work. All her work during the 1970s has been written under this influence. The Sufi conception of a teacher, a guru, an initiator is found in *Martha Quest* in the relationship between Martha and Thomas. It looks like an ordinary love-affair but there are other kinds of undercurrents. Martha, through Thomas, makes contact with the energy of life itself. She feels as if, in the room where they are making love there is a “softly-running dynamo, to which through him she was connected.” (L 113)

She asks Thomas as how long it will take their nerves, their consciousness, to imbibe the new principles she is given a not-very-hopeful answer:
Centuries, very likely. Perhaps there’ll be a mutation though. Perhaps that’s why we’re all sick. Something new is trying to get through our thick skins. (L 448)

Thus here we have the Sufi theory of evolution of the human species, but here it is supposed to be the result of some mutation.

The Sufic concept of this development, of earthly paradise and of the mythical city is seen at its best and has been finally worked out in The Four-Gated City. This book has already been discussed in the relevant chapter.

Throughout the book there are relationships that are odd by ordinary social standards. Lynda in this novel is subject to schizophrenia. This trait, which is looked upon as a variety of madness, is looked upon very differently by Lessing herself and she makes the doctors in the book change their traditional view of this mental aberration too. They come to look upon it as a proof of the higher faculties of the human mind. Schizophrenia, in this book gives insights into mystical, extra-sensory faculties which ultimately help in human evolution. This is a Sufi doctrine, though the Sufis do not talk of schizophrenia.

It is in the Appendix of the book that Lessing expresses her understanding and interpretation of the Sufi theory of evolution. A catastrophe takes place that nearly destroys the human race. The children born after the catastrophe possess extra-sensory powers. They are clairvoyants and clairaudients. There are seven of them. Martha looks upon them as guardians of humanity. They are to take it forward. The picture presented is a very hopeful one:

It was as if the veil between this world and another had worn thin—so thin that earth people and people from the sun could walk together and be companions. (TFGC 643)

It is an island where all this happens, the Fairies island. The children born after the catastrophe are all mutants as a result of the radiations of the catastrophe. So it is clear that here Lessing has brought together Sufism and
science fiction. In a passage by Idries Shah that has been used as the epigraph to part Four of *The Four-Gated City* shah says:

Humanity is evolving towards a certain destiny. We are all taking part in that evolution. Organs come into being as a result of a need for specific organs. The human being’s organism is producing a new complex of organs in response to such a need. In this age of the transcending of time and space the complex of organs is concerned with the transcending of time and space. What ordinary people regard as sporadic and occasional bursts of telepathic and prophetic powers are seen by the Sufi as nothing less than the first stirrings of these same organs.

Thus we have Lessing’s vision of the apocalypse—an apocalypse in which Sufism and science fiction have become unequal yokefellows.

The claims of feminism are definitely more valid than those of communism and Sufism. Doris Lessing, of course, has dissociated from it, but then, she has habitually refused to be associated with any group or movement. The Nobel committee had, as has been already pointed out, called her an “epicist of the female experience, and, in the preface to the 1972 edition of *The Golden Notebook* she has clearly said that she supports feminism:

> To get the subject of Women’s Liberation over with I support it, of course, because women are second-class citizens. (Preface to TGNB 8)

It is a rather peculiar position that she has taken up. She supports the cause of feminism whole-heartedly. All her works are blatantly feministic, yet she says she is not a feminist. Yet this is the one feature of her work that is present there from the beginning to the end. She has been, again and again called a second-wave feminist by literary critics as well as the adherents of the movement itself.

There is certain onwards movement in her feministic ideas to be seen in her works. First of all her heroines are all financially independent. This had been
one of the important tenets of the first wave feminists-financial independence. In the 60s, when the second wave consolidated, this was taken for granted. Doris Lessing portrays her heroines as being financially independent, but depending on men for other, more intangible things, like admiration, appreciation. This means that mentally they are not independent. This trait is the most remarkable in her mature novel, *The Summer Before the Dark*. Here the heroine Kate is not only financially independent, she earns more than her husband does, more than many men do. She is affluent by any standard. Yet she is shown as craving male appreciation. This is seen at its most explicit in the scene in which she parades past a group of laborers in *the street*. She has found out that by doing her hair in a certain way, wearing a certain kind of dress, walking in a certain way she attract the attention of men and doing the opposite she does not. She had been standing at a street corner, watching the men at work. She is dressed just anyhow, not to attract notice:

Kate realized that she was standing still, staring, had been for some minutes.
The men took no notice of her. (TSBD 242)

She becomes angry at this neglect and quickly goes away and changes her personality and comes back again. She does it not just once, but quite a few times:

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 and saw that a girl. . . stood. . . watching. (TSBD 242, 43)
This girl is Maureen. Now once more, in front of her in order to prove her
point she does this act again:

Kate made the journey as an invisible. She noted that as she did so, she was
again filled with a need to pull up her skirts and show them her backside.
(TSBD 243)

This, of course, is an extreme example. But it proves the point that she
needs the attention of men. In this matter she is not totally independent.

Apart from this, earlier in the novel, it has been seen that she is dependent
on her family for emotional support. It starts with dependence on her husband.
When she realizes that her husband is unfaithful to her she feels devastated:

A few days ago she would have said that whatever emotions, or thoughts…
were standing offstage . . . they surely could have nothing to do with the fact
that her Michael had trivial affairs by the dozen with anybody he could? . . .
because of Michael she felt like a doll whose sawdust was slowly trickling
away.(TSBD 73)

But then, because of his continued infidelities she too loses the respect she
has for him and decides to go to Spain with a young lover, Jeffrey. They go, but
almost immediately Jeffrey falls ill. So here is another person who needs her and
she conscientiously fulfils the need. He needs her and she needs to be needed.
But this is another stage that passes. She gradually, after a few days, overcomes
this mutual need:

. . . now she was saying to herself that he was after all a man of thirty, that he
would continue to live and probably even to prosper if she were not waiting at
the hotel to sit with him once or twice a day for an hour. (TSBD 146)

So she once more shakes off the shackles of emotional dependence and goes
away.

She then comes and rent 3 a room at Maureen’s flat. Here her gaining
independence from her family is gradually portrayed. Throughout the novel she
has been shown to have been the ideal mother, the ideal housewife. Her family
needed her and she needed them. But now the time has come when they are all
grown up and do not need her. Right at the beginning of the book this had been
realized by her and she had been wondering how she will occupy herself now
that she is not needed any longer by her children and her husband:

   It is not possible, after all, to be a woman with any sort of a mind, and not know
   that in middle age, in the full flood of one’s capacities and energies, one is
   bound to become that well-documented and much-studied phenomenon, the
   woman with grown-up children and not enough to do, whose energies must be
   switched from the said children to less vulnerable targets, for everybody’s sake,
   her own as well as theirs. (TSBD 23)

   So the job at Global Food had come at a crucial time. It gave her money,
occupation, and appreciation. But now, at Maureen’s flat, she achieves
independence in this respect also. She does not need the support and
appreciation of her family. What is more, she does not any longer need to be
needed by them. She had decided to return home in a hurry, but now she
changes her plans. She had been preparing for her return. She had ordered the
grocer to deliver material, made several appointments with her neighbors etc.
etc. and now she cancels everything all on a sudden:

   She returned to the telephone, cancelling appointments, telling neighbors that
her plans had changed, and causing groceries that had already left their shelves
to be returned to them. (TSBD 229)

   Then she sends telegrams to all the members of her family and the family
that had rented her house:

   Kate sent this telegram to the states: “Very sorry. Have already made plans
retuning end of October.”.

   To Tim she wired, “Very sorry unable to nurse you house open from day
after tomorrow.” To the Enders’s she wired, “Leave the keys with Mary
Finchley; my plans changed.” (TSBD 229)
Thus she shows her independence. But then there still remains one other bondage. She has become a mother-figure for Maureen, and she knows that Maureen wants and needs her advice. She overcomes this temptation as well. But now she has realized that this girl will have to take her own decision in marrying. Whether she marries or not, which of the two men who want her she is going to marry - in these respects it is finally for her only to decide. So she refrains from advising her either way. Maureen is crying broken-heartedly, because she cannot decide. But Kate keeps quiet in spite of everything: Kate sat down and kept silent. She was thinking that she had indeed made a long journey in the last months. Before it she could not have sat quiet, while a girl her daughter’s age wept with misery because of her, Kate’s power to darken her future. Kate, at the end of what she suddenly was feeling as a long interior journey, would have been “Sensible”, made balanced remarks of one kind or another, attempted consolation, because she had still believed that consolation could be given. Yes, that was where she had changed. (TSBD 226)

So she does not advise in any manner, - whether positive or negative. Instead she tells Maureen a basic truth that underlies all the choices that people might have to make at one or the other stage:

She remarked, “where I think you may be wrong is that you seem to be thinking that if you decide not to become one thing, the other thing you become has to be better” (TSBD 226)

With overcoming this temptation to decide for other people, to give them advice she becomes totally free. She leaves the flat in the middle of the party, without telling anyone:

No one noticed Kate with her suitcase. So she picked it up, let herself unobserved out of the flat, and made her way to the bus stop and so home. (TSBD 273)

So she chooses to go back to her former life. But it is a choice made in full freedom of spirit, uninfluenced by any outward circumstances and
uninfluenced by any inner compulsion like a sense of duty or compassion or anything else. The wheel of her choice makes a full turn because she, with open eyes, chooses to go back to the same life that she came from. This is a definitely new turn for feminism.

The change in her outlook, in her attitude to life, is a definite, well marked change. It is a completely feministic one, since it leads definitely to independence of the mind-full independence. It can be depicted like this:

1. Financial independence but needing to be needed by husband.
2. Financial independence and marital independence but needing to be needed by family.
3. Financial, marital and familial independence but needing men’s appreciation
4. Total independence, not needing any kind of support.

This gradual, totally feministic and mature outlook is to be found in *The Summer Before the Dark* and that is why this book has been chosen here. In *The Golden Notebook* also there is a certain progress, but not so well marked.

There is, however, one thing that needs to be pointed out. This change in Kate is looked upon as a progress, it is true, but it may also be regarded as mere change, not progress. Kate is shown as gradually, by stages, throwing off all kinds of feeling of dependence, financial as well as mental, so that at the end she emerges as not caring for anyone’s opinion at all, whether it is of society or of her family. This may be taken as progress, but, on the face of it, it may also appear as just callousness or indifference. The change or progress that is depicted here could have been depicted in reverse and then too it could have been valid. It seems, therefore, to be a rather arbitrary one.

But, whatever be the reader’s attitude, it is undeniably true that Doris Lessing is clearly a feminist writer. Communism, Sufism, science-fiction, these
had all been passing phases, feminism has endured. For a simple fact, all her novels are women-centered. All her male characters are, at best, secondary characters, or shadowy figures. It is as an “epicist of the female sensibility” that she was awarded the Nobel. It may well be that she herself will refuse to be categorized, but all readers and literary critics have already come to this definite conclusion: she is a feminist writer.
Works Cited


