CHAPTER THREE : AFRICA

This chapter undertakes to explore some of the critical tensions generated by the African locale that surrounds young Doris during her formative years. Experiences of childhood and youth, the manner in which she fought her way to education through poverty, the resourceful but overburdened, unhappy mother, the imaginative father sitting under the stars eternally dreaming, her reading of nineteenth century realist writers, especially the Russian novelists, leading to a certain development of the psyche, awareness and desire for self-liberation due to a conventional marriage were some factors that shaped her attitudes while they also contributed to a bleak vision of life. Besides, the rich contradictions inherent in the landscape that formed a crucial backdrop to her earliest experiences helped to push her on to a meaningful creative terrain. On the one hand, the African outback is described in her texts as desolate, bleak and empty, vast open spaces wherein it was possible to be isolated and lonely. On the other hand, this savage and primeval land was suggestive of a mythical charm, evocative of dream. There are many Africas in her fiction and all these versions in diverse ways, emerge as metaphors that pervade her subsequent writing. Impossible to reconcile due to their contradictory natures, these varied perspectives fuel the contexts of the writing in mutivalent voices: Africa, with the lush green sap or the dry hot and barren land, “black- maned with forest, twitching in the heat”, crickets, snakes and lizards, mountains and vleis, with its promise, its uncreatedness. In Going Home, she describes it as a “magnificent country with all its riches in the future. We can dream of cities and a civilisation more beautiful than anything that has been seen in the world before” (GH 14). In
fact she speaks of understanding between people with opposite beliefs “who have been made by the same landscape” (10-11).

The historical and geographical Africa is manifest in the world of kopjes and sundowners, a “home” that is so indulgently portrayed in The Golden Notebook and early Children of Violence novels, the home she returns to in African Laughter. And then there is the savage and primordial Africa, the heart of primitive darkness. It is in here that Lessing’s hugely successful debut novel, The Grass is Singing, is set, where her first protagonist, Mary Turner, experiences regression, confronting the horror of nullity, succumbing finally to the violence of murder. The novel reads as an “explicit indictment of racist colonial society” while it depicts too “a mystical and deterministic resignation in the face of the forces of savage nature”. Borsetsen’s reading invokes polarities that simultaneously pull in contrary directions. Scientific and political thought leads the way towards progressive and developmental directions, thereby suggesting “balance, tolerance, individual autonomy and the democratic ideal”. The socialist-realist fiction of the nineteenth century also supports such a world-view, asserting, as do Darwin and Spencer, that “everything grows”. The scientific theory of evolution finds important applications in Marxist political economy and later, psychoanalytic theories. Whereas the notion of the existence of man in a continuum of linear development is inferred in the movement from simple forms to complex positions there exists too a contrary pull in the opposite direction—unspoilt savage nature, primitive peoples, anarchic and uncivilised forces, suggestive of “hostile, irrational, disordered, fearsome and destructive energies” (Bertelsen 650). The same essay sees Kurtz as Mary Turner’s literary ancestor, as it suggests too connections with Lawrentian heroes who “cut
themselves free of society to pursue the often destructive imperative of the natural life of the instincts’. Such a reading finds emerging the idea of nature and Africa as “quintessentially savage, a symbol of uncontainable energy, a collection of dark, extreme forces that are constantly threatening to run out of control, to reassert themselves and claim some primitive ascendancy”(657). At the centre of this cultural myth stands Moses, indistinct as individual. His association with the soil is indicative of his libido and his physicality is accompanied by a destructive primeval energy. The violence of thunder, lightning and rain assist his murderous intent and as Bertelsen insists: “this deep nonrational cultural myth determines the ideological impact of the book”(650). The novel ends with the following words: “And then the bush avenged itself: that was her last thought. The trees advanced in a rush, like beasts and the thunder was the noise of their coming . . . the brain at last gave way, collapsing in a ruin of horror . . . ” (GS 217). This chapter explores Lessing’s vision of Africa as a savage land capable of letting loose repressed forces of anarchy and derangement. There is complex irony in her portrayal of the First World extolling civilised virtue and a superior benediction. The other suggestion, perhaps more traumatic for the white man, and subtly expressed too, is that of his own black and evolutionary past, his own earlier savagery, and the residue of such wildness that is evidenced in his instincts and basic drives, in the form of a neurosis that lurks always beneath the surface. Going Home and African Laughter are the other texts taken up for comments and brief analyses. In both the bedrock of physical and psychological experience is located in an African landscape, of the past and of more recent times, the novels separated by a significant gap of thirty-five years.
For Lessing, her parents became the character stereotypes who find a way of slipping into her works. From Mary and Dick Turner in her first novel The Grass is Singing to Martha’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Quest in Children of Violence, the shadowy mother figure behind the wall in Memoirs of a Survivor, Dorothy Mellings in The Good Terrorist, even the parents in the short story ‘Debbie and Julie’ in London Observed, the resemblances are obvious. “We use our parents like recurring dreams, to be entered into when needed: they are always there for love or for hate”; about her father’s war experiences, that transformed him from a compassionate, high-spirited and wise man to an “ill, irritable, abstracted, hypochondriac”, she writes, “His leg was cut off at mid-thigh, he was shell-shocked, very ill for many months, with a prolonged depression afterwards... His childhood and young man’s memories, kept fluid, were added to, grew, as living memories do. But his war memories were congealed in stories that he told again and again, with the same words and gestures, in stereotyped phrases.” So overwhelming is the presence of Lessing’s mother in her fiction that it may be seen as a predominant metaphor. From the first novel to Love, Again, the last so far, along with “real” documentation that is substantiated through essays and autobiography, her domineering persona, forever trying to stunt the daughter’s growth, stalks Lessing’s writing. The chapter on autobiography discusses this aspect in more detail.

The intense self absorption of her heroines, their preoccupation with their own development, an introspective gaze as well as her increasing concern in the later novels with disorder, disintegration and doom are all partly linked to her early experiences in racist Africa. The move to London in the post-war years, an account
of which is available both in her non-fictional *In Pursuit of the English* and fictional *Four-Gated City*, made her aware of her perennial outsider status. This sense of alienation is obvious when she speaks of Africa as belonging to the blacks, "the sooner they take it back the better it is." A simultaneous sense of belonging makes her go on and add: "But a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it. Perhaps it may be that the love of Africa the country will be strong enough to link people who hate each other now. Perhaps" (*GH* 10-11). This is obvious also from the title of her non-fiction work about a return to Africa, titled *Going Home* and her recent book about four visits to Zimbabwe, lovingly called *African Laughter*.

Dick Turner in *The Grass is Singing* is one of the first characters to embody such a contradiction, i.e. the co-existence of an intense love of Africa with a callous indifference to its people. His appeal for the reader lies perhaps in these contradictions and oppositions. Tony Marston is the liberal outsider in the novel, and his view provides in a sense a clue to the way the novel should be read. He says, "the important thing, the thing that really mattered was to understand the background, the circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary, the pattern of their lives" (*GS* 23). Zambesia is the name she gives to that part of Africa where her African writing is set, describing it in a note to the *Four Gated City* as a "composite of various white dominated parts of Africa and . . . some of the characteristics of its white people are those of any ruling minority whatever their colour". The ambivalences in her response are what result in a creative tension which makes her both a sensitive and a prolific writer. On the one hand the lonely mud house in the vast African wilderness signifies for her the only home she ever had - "the fact is, I don't live anywhere; I never have since I left the first home on the kopje" she
comments in *Going Home* (37). On the other hand, the ambiguities of her status cause a rupture that is self-divisive - and it was difficult for her to forget that she was a prohibited migrant. Charlie Slatter the stereotypical white colonial in the novel, with an uncanny instinct for self preservation, insistently safeguards this myth of a unified British community in Africa when he tells the newly-arrived Tony “be like us or get out.” When the Slatters visit Mary, Charlie can sense that something is out of sync. There is a coy flirtatiousness in Mary and an offensive authority in Moses. His offer to buy Dick's farm is not charity but an avowal of the contract “Thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point because if you do the nigger will see that he is as good as you”(*GS* 210). However this kind of homogeneous colonial attitude, both internalised and expected from the coloniser/colonised is not a given Lessing believes in. For her such a stance is unacceptable because, besides being partial and partisan it also denies important possibilities of individuation.

Frantz Fanon writes of the sharp demarcation between coloniser and colonised and the clear balance of power, in mythic terms:

The colonial world is a world cut in two...The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settler. The two zones are opposed but not to the service of a higher unity...both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. The settler's town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town. The streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leanings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easy-going town, its belly is always full of good things. The settler's town is a
white people, of foreigners. This world divided into compartments, cut in
two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial
contest is that economic reality, inequality and immense difference of ways
of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close
quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what passes out the world is
to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a
given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also the
superstructure.*

The strategy that works towards marginalising and silencing of the post-
colonial voice by the imperial centre is based on the conditioning that persuades
belief in the theory of inherent inferiority of the colonised. In this context, extremely
telling is the sarcastic comment of the opening section “A little History” of African
Laughter: “The hearts of innumerable men and women responded with idealistic
fervour to his (Cecil Rhodes’) clarion, because it went without saying that it would
be good for Africa, or for anywhere else, to be made British”; she continues,
“having taken the best land for themselves, and set up an efficient machinery of
domination, the British in Southern Rhodesia were able to persuade themselves - as
is common among conquerors - that the conquered were inferior, that white
tutelage was to their advantage, that they were bound to be grateful recipients of a
superior civilisation” (AL 3-4). Fanon’s discussion of Settler vs Native refers to the
terms used to describe the latter which are aimed at dehumanising him:
“Zoolological” references like “yellow man’s reptilian motions”, “stink of the native
quarter”, of “breeding swarms”, “foulness, spawn, gesticulations” and hysteria all
suggestive of those bereft of humanity. . . “General de Gaulle speaks of “the yellow
multitudes” and Francois Mauriac of the black, brown and yellow masses which soon will be unleashed” (Fanon 33). He writes also of the response of the native laughing to himself each time he spots an allusion to the animal world in the other’s words: “For he knows he is not an animal; and it is precisely at the moment he realises his humanity that he begins to sharpen his weapons with which to secure his victory” (33). He describes decolonisation as the time when the masses mock at western values that they have been forced to accept and respect and which they now insult and reject. Lessing’s faith in decolonisation manifests itself in her awareness of injustice, the rare courage of the trouble maker and a fighting spirit that makes life meaningful.

Lessing, grown, matured, developed, as a woman and as a writer, on the Rhodesian farm, cut off from neighbours, different from most others due to her sympathetic leanings towards the natives experienced within herself dichotomies and paradoxes. Her autobiography Under My Skin articulates complex questions that it also seeks to answer. Was it the limitless vast African landscape of the bush the loss of which she laments in African Laughter, and the natives to whom the land really belongs or was it her shadowy but real and potent nevertheless, European literary ancestors that help to construct her sense of self? The influences that shaped Lessing and her work were multiple and diverse. Among the early influences, too well documented to need any reiteration were the Realists. Propped on her pillow through the candlelit night or tucked away in the vast bush, Lessing's girlhood was spent among them; “For me the highest point of literature was the novel of the nineteenth century, the work of Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Turgenev, Chekov” (SPV 6). Lessing’s body of work seen together coheres in an
amazing manner, the early work looking forward and onward, themes and characters intermeshing and resonating as also the later work becoming more dense and using a completely different form, that of space fantasy, to say things already written about in the realist mode. In Lessing's introduction to *Nine African Stories* she writes, “Novels, stories, plays, can convey the truth about personal relations, emotions, and attitudes of which the people subject to them are perhaps unaware, or only partly aware. Literature comes out of atmospheres, climates of opinion, everything that cannot be described by the economic, the sociological approaches.”

Many ideas, floating around, and those within the mind of the novelist, go to construct a work. Clues about the creative process in general - “You can think about a story for years, and then write it down in an hour. You may work out the shape of a novel for decades, before spending a few months working on it.” The particular impulses that went to form *The Grass Is Singing* can be plentifully found in interviews and other autobiographical materials. Inspired by someone she knew, a forty-year old who behaved like a little girl, helped her perhaps construct a Mary Turner who “modeled herself on the more-childish looking film stars”, wearing her hair little girl fashion, her clothes little girl frocks, in pastel colours *(GS 37)*. Mary's denial of sexuality is manifest both through an impersonal, shy stiffness of manner and her repulsion at the thought of intimacies. She takes a sense of stern pride in being alone, compassionate, adaptable though heart-whole. The reader may wonder if there is an affinity-of-sorts between Mary's dark (repressed) self and black-Moses whose realities Lessing chose to leave in the shadows.

The detailed discussion of the novel later in this chapter outlines some of the dynamics of Mary's breakdown while it also examines her relationships with other
characters in the novel. To return to formative experiences that shaped this first novel, Lessing reminisces that once when she was twelve or thirteen, her mother sent her to call the 'cook-boy' whom she saw standing at the back of the house under a tree. "The story was written out of experience", she says, "what I saw, being I don't know how old I was, twelve or thirteen, was this classical sight of a naked penis which I had never, ever seen in my life before." 7 The tones of grown-ups on farm verandahs, gossipping in hushed tones about a white woman, recently arrived in Africa who used to allow her 'boy' to button up her dress and brush her hair were some other influences that went into the making of this first novel.

The novel says of Mary "Mary's personality was determined by her upbringing, the poverty of the family, their situation, emotional and economic"(GS_131). The temporary nature of the house that she grew up in would have also contributed to the vision of belonging to a world "in parentheses", a world then essentially damaged because unpermanent and thus unstable. While the Epigraph from 'The Waste Land' with which the novel begins encapsulates the atmosphere of aridity and a sense of waiting for the rain, the gossip and criticism of verandah-talk form the sub-text of the novel. The novel is richly complex due to the manner in which it can be variously read. As a first novel it introduces many of the areas that continue to concern the novelist in later times too, like racism and the colour question, politics and gender ideology, disintegrations and mental collapse, repression and construction of individual identity. Issues concerned with colonising, both white versus black and man vs. woman and the implications thereof, are meaningfully addressed through the novel. A look at Mary Turner reveals her head held high, mouth set tight, rigid with pride and determination not to show weakness. Forever
stiff with resentment, her voice is that of the suffering female, an inheritance from her mother. Keen to perform the coloniser’s role to perfection she is obsessed with natives. Keeping vigil with a vengeance, flying at them at the slightest pretext she treats them worse than animals. While on the farm with Dick, her thoughts are always with the native back home, alone with ‘her’ things, ‘handling’ them. Her early life is seen as having been a major formative influence on her psyche, her self-conscious behaviour and repressed sexual attitudes a result of the subduing of her personality in an attempt to consciously remodel it in order to fit into an acceptable social stereotype. These repressions surface in the form of her desire for Moses, the native who works for the Turners and her killer too... It may be suggested that her private self was largely a result of the traumatic relationship between her parents and her public persona shaped under the impact of experiences of living in racist Africa. Is it possible though to effect such a division without risking an inner divisiveness, one wonders. Mary certainly manifests schizophrenia of a kind. There is a split between her two selves, the conforming and the rebellious, both of which are social constructs. The repressive patriarchal society has pushed all the repressions into the unconscious and these surface when she breaks down. Breakdown and fragmentation are important themes in Lessing’s work, the influences of Jung and Laing evident.

Mary is made off-balance by heat, loneliness and poverty. The dissatisfaction and lack of joy in her essential temperament is highlighted due to these factors. Her inherent qualities, for instance, an impersonal, shy and stiff manner, repelled by intimacies, take on further intensity. Having taken the voice of the suffering female from her mother, her relationship with Dick is paradoxical. She had agreed to be his
wife, even like him, if he put himself in a subordinate position. The sexual act too is satisfactory in a perverse sort of way in that it doesn’t touch her anywhere. Theirs is a complex relationship as it addresses questions like “what kind of a man does a woman need”, “when she saw him weak and goal-less she hated him and the hatred turned upon herself” (GS 168). Patriarchal standards are internalised to such an extent that in order to respect herself Mary needs to find worthiness in her man. She wonders how people can be born without that “streak of determination, that bit of iron that clamped the personality together. Hopeless, decent, nice, doomed” is how she describes Dick (168).

When all hopes that she had pinned on the tobacco crop are shattered as a result of drought she suffers from irrevocable loss of hope and emptiness as she realises that it would be years before they could get off the farm. It is for her a time of “dull misery: not the sharp bouts of unhappiness that had attacked her earlier (that was at least an ability to feel). Now she felt as if she were going soft inside at the core, as if a soft rottenness was attacking her bones...numbed, tired, without interest” (162). She makes an effort to hold on to something that might save her when she asks Dick if they can have a child and when he refuses she sinks further into the darkness of herself. By now she has developed all signs of a nervous breakdown, listlessness and lack of interest, irritation and stupor, tiredness and numbness. She makes a last desperate attempt to spend time with Dick on the farm but here too meets no success: “and now she gave way...she felt as if a touch would send her off-balance into nothingness; she thought of a full complete darkness with longing” (173).
Complete inner disintegration sets in for Mary when she is brought back by Dick after she runs away to town to get back to her job. Her experience with the boss and others at the office makes her realise that she is a misfit. She seems to have come from another world with her chipped nails, coarse hands, streaky scrawny hair, muddy shoes. There seems to be something more serious wrong too as she is unable to 'connect'. Her isolation on the farm and the degradation she had sunk to due to poverty and the inhospitable African climate makes her unsuitable for company. The channels of spontaneity and real emotion seem to have been permanently blocked, both due to childhood experiences of living with parents who shared a loveless marriage as well as coping with pressures of living in a racist society. She lives then on a different plane of reality, turning within all the time so that slow disintegration matures into complete neuroses. External factors interrupt and thus delay her downward slide as she is forced to relate to the world without, at least superficially and for sometime, and thus cannot afford to really slip into the abyss. Most breakdowns in women are known to take place when extraneous factors like familial responsibilities do not make the kind of demands they once did with children having grown independent, leading to a feeling of superfluity and unwantedness in the female psyche. Kate in Summer goes through a similar experience.

Mary's relationship with Moses is crucial to an understanding of the text. It is significant that her repressions surface through interaction with an individual who is a victim of colonialism. The darkness within her responds to the dark reality of the bush symbolised by him. She feels for him repulsion as well as a strange attraction that her conscious mind cannot comprehend. Having been schooled to hate the
natives and treat them like the scum of the earth she is obsessed with ideas of keeping them "under strict vigil, fly at them under the slightest pretext" (GIS 80).

The atmosphere of the novel is characterised by an attitude to the blacks that is wholly negative and discriminatory. Significantly, the experience of seeing him bathing and an acknowledgement of it by both "jerked her clean out of her apathy for the first time in months, seeing the ground she walked on, feeling the hot sun on her neck" (177). The scene has been compared to Mellors washing himself in Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover. In an interview with Bertelsen, Lessing responds to the comparison, saying, "Well, I’d read all of Lawrence and Virginia Woolf of the moderns, but it actually astounds me that it’s reminiscent of Lady chatterley’s Lover! I suppose they influenced me. The thing is I read so much then, you see. Because I was very isolated, I read day and night. Luckily I read very fast. It’d be very hard to say what influenced me and what didn’t" (Ingersoll 127).

The Mary-Moses relationship undergoes a change as her condition deteriorates. Her mind allows her to let everything slide and she is unable to cope with external reality. When he announces that he wants to leave she breaks down. A new relationship develops between them as she feels herself to be helplessly in his power. She suffers from a strange and irrational fear, the coloniser expecting the colonised to strike back perhaps. When nursing Dick back to health, she is extremely conscious of his footsteps in the next room. Dreams of Moses mingle incoherently with those of her father as she sinks into a different order of reality, unwashed smells of her father from her childhood resurfacing in the form of Moses advancing towards her.
Interestingly, Lessing comments on the deceiving quality of memory when she questions the authenticity and validity of remembered experience in her autobiography. In *African Laughter* she writes: “... I hold a series of sharp little scenes, like photographs, or eidetic memory, which I refer to”. Time, for her, has “slippery qualities”, chipping, eroding, blurring. “if you labour enough over an event, a moment, you make a solid thing of it, may revisit it... is it still there? Is it still the same?”, she asks (*AL* 40). Moses, however, belongs to the repressed facet of her personality too as the colonised is in a sense part of the coloniser’s psyche.

For Mary then the one reality she is forced to confront is that of Moses. In her mind a confusion has been effected, making her both the powerful and the powerless. As the former she holds the reins while as the latter she is the colonised ‘other’. He is physically strong and takes initiative, both of which are qualities she is unable to find in her husband. Her search for a man who will assume power is what invests Moses with it while the dialectics make the relationship for Mary both threatening and terrifying. The mere acknowledgement of a personal connection between them leads to a confusion of the norm that is so unsettling that it pushes her further down the abyss. Dream and reality come together as she wakes up from her menacing dream to find him standing there, a cup of tea in his hand. The voice of the dream asks her, “Madame, afraid of me, yes?” and later, as she replies in a high-pitched voice” (laughing nervously sort of voice, flirtatious)’Don’t be ridiculous’” the barriers that separate black from white are eliminated too, thereby admitting a possibility that it is sacrilege to admit (*GS* 204). All horrors break loose as a chink in the white armour is exposed, danger so far lurking in the shadows coming dangerously close. Mary’s unconscious, hitherto repressed, and this is the ‘shadow’
aspect that Jung writes of too, begins to surface and her conscious self begins to avoid contact with him. “When he had left after lunch for his time off, she went hastily into the kitchen, almost furtively, made cold drinks for Dick, and returned looking behind her as if pursued”(206). For the first time in her life she willfully seeks refuge in the marital bed, thankful to be close to Dick. The unconscious has gained so much primacy that the pattern of the conscious has to be changed in order to keep its threatening influences at bay. “Dick became to her, as time went by, more and more unreal; while the thought of the African grew obsessive”(206). The conscious and the unconscious have gradually and imperceptibly changed places.

The only time Mary suddenly became alert and active was when Moses was in the room. She remains in a dream of her own and he is part of her dream. Besides, for her the dream is an alternative order of reality. Tony notices that her manner had no relation to what she was saying and he gets the impression that “she wasn’t quite all there.” He adds, “she behaves simply as if she lives in a world of her own, where other people’s standards don’t count. She has forgotten what her own people are like. But then what is madness but a refuge, a retreating from the world?”(222).

The call to solidarity that holds most whites together in an alien land sets the code of behaviour—that then is the norm. For Mary in her isolation and a deliberate inwardness due to pride, unadaptability, a twisted personality, that call was never a valid one and thus she could set her own standards, make her own code. Now more than ever before Charlie Slatter too notices that things are not as they should be when he sees that Mary speaks to Moses with a coy flirtatiousness and he in turn uses an offensive tone of authority. Mary’s life has been a persistent endeavour to get away from a statement about herself that she had overheard long ago, her
rushing into marriage contrary to her own spontaneous desires and rigidly held beliefs symptomatic of this. "They said I was not like that" was a point of view she sets out to disprove, Moses' attitude of "indulgent uxoriousness" as he dresses her, also an attempt to contradict the self-image that she confronts in the mirror(227). Moses' look of admiration restores to some extent her self-confidence, awarding a kind of meaning to her existence. Deeply embedded in her subconscious is the feminine desire to please, attract and seduce the male. It is only when her 'other' self becomes predominant that she can behave in this manner because it is only in this state that she is unaware of the manner in which she is behaving. Lessing writes that Mary was "specifically based on somebody I knew who interested me, because at the age of nearly forty she was like a young girl and lived the life of a girl, . . .I think that the patterns of people's lives are determined by their society and by their characters and their upbringing"( Ingersoll 131-32). Whatever kind of person Mary inherently is she always feels the societal pressure to conform, to be someone else.

Now that the silent acceptance of white superiority has been shattered by an acknowledgement of fear in Mary's eyes and her subsequent appeasement of the native by her manner towards him there is a change in their relationship. He acquires a new tone, "familiar, half-insolent, domineering". There is a split between Mary's two selves, the self that conforms and the one that rebels. This is a complex work as explorations of psychological issues are mingled with the colour question, a personal human relationship examined against the impossibility of it. Dream then and forces of the unconscious that surface through them are doubly important here. An exploration of the unconscious through dreams, says Lessing, need not be seen as a threat but as a liberation from oppressive conditions which perpetuate feelings
of worthlessness and despair. In an interview with Jonah Raskin, she refers to her responses to dreams. She observes:

Dreams have always been important to me. . . The Freudsians describe the conscious as a small lit area, all white, and the unconscious as a great marsh full of monsters. In their view, the mouths reach up, grab you by the ankles and try to drag you down. But the unconscious can be what you make of it, good or bad, helpful or unhelpful. Our culture has made an enemy of the unconscious. . . other cultures have accepted the unconscious as a helpful force, and I think we should learn to see it in that way too . . . With a few symbols a dream can define the whole of one’s life, and warn us of the future too(Ingerson 14).

According to Jung, “Myths which day has concealed altogether continue to be told by night and powerful figures which consciousness has reduced to banality and ridiculous triviality are recognized again by poets and prophetically revived; therefore they can also be recognized in changed form “by the thoughtful person”:

For Mary antagonism to what is expected leads inevitably to a sense of isolation which is a permanent facet of her character. Although this compelling need to be alone makes Mary and other Lessing protagonists, like Martha in the later novels, lose emotional rapport with their fellow beings, for Mary this leads to more negativity as in the case of Martha there is a collective ‘we’ to hold on to. In Children of Violence there is progression and development, a kind of integration finally emerging out of the process of disintegration. Mary’s steel-strong sufficiency is comparable to Lessing’s. Attracted to the myth of Africa with its isolation, loneliness and a sense of space that it was possible to dream in, both anger and an
alluring lyricism are innate in the novel. Living in a reserve, with the closest neighbours at least four or five miles away the family was forced into a friendless existence. Young Doris rejected family standards, breaking the hearts of her parents, when she divorced her first husband. The myth of solidarity, stretched to breaking point in the novel, is also a part of their personal condition. She left home but the brother stayed back because it was important that the family stay together. Not a happy sacrifice, it led to resentments and a sense of betrayal thereby colouring relationships with negativity. Her childhood memories are those of living in abject poverty, the mother saving, scraping, scrounging, mending, going through neurotic illness due to pressures of making ends meet. Painfully practical she is unfortunate in being married to a perpetual and hopeless dreamer. Lessing remembers her father as an incorrigible romantic, not merely looking up at the stars but indulging in various hairbrained schemes to attain them. He wasted time, effort and money looking for gold on his farm and invested unwisely in crazy projects involving bees, pigs and finally a cloth-store for Kaffirs. Doris, as a child and as a young woman, felt the pressures of her family life and her surroundings intensely, remembering with trauma scenes of endless bickering between her parents. Besides, she was repulsed by Rhodesian society wherein the self was narrowly defined and rigidly controlled, race seen as a basis for determining stereotype. Americans and Europeans were civilised and courteous and allowed to move about freely while Africans were seen as simple peasants who needed to be restricted.

It would be short-sighted to see the evocation of the parched earth and merciless frightening bush as mere handouts from a remembered personal past. They are, though, symbols of spiritual desolation, conflict, dissatisfaction and deep
longing, an inherent lack of freedom. Feeling caged while living in abject poverty on
the farm Mary continuously imagines the pleasures money could buy for her,
ceilings to lessen the heat that oppresses her so unimaginably, a holiday on the coast
and finally the ability to leave the farm forever. This closely parallels Lessing's
mother's persistent and desperate desire to return to England so that she may begin
to live. It is significant and interesting that the daughter does get away just as soon
as she can. Starved by economic deprivation she knows that money alone can set
her free. Ideas and images intersect in Lessing's fiction and a related day-dream
concerned with freedom that Martha has is that of a rich and unknown relative
coming forward with a hundred pounds to set her free. When Mary lapses into
fantasy she imagines herself as the efficient secretary back at the office in town
being 'taken out' by men with an easy comaraderie. In fact her inner disintegration
finally sets in after her return from town when she realises hopelessly that all roads
to freedom are completely jammed for her.

In fact when she returns to Africa in Going Home and later in African
Laughter just as she is uncertain about which Africa she loves best, the green and
lush country where the sap runs and the earth is wet, or the dry, brown-gold wastes
of the drought when the sky gets dimmed with smoke and the sun gets distorted so
too there is an indulgent kind of nostalgia in her response to the country that is
somewhat confusing. She is taken around the compound where she sees the ragged
barefoot and malnutritioned children. Her host is very proud at the improvements
that he says have taken place in their condition. His emphasis is on the so-called
'happiness' of the natives of which he is convinced although they don't return at the
start of the next season, despite being offered a £2 bonus. Lessing notices instead
the poor condition of the compound, smelling of damp vegetation, chicken-
droppings, the single yellowish electric-light bulb glowing from the rafters of the
shed that is their makeshift school. Noticing the extreme squalor of the place
Lessing comments, “It all made me feel nothing had changed and nothing ever
could: the big, bare room, with the stars shining more brilliantly through the
window than the light inside the room; the so soft hot air coming in; and the talk,
which was, of course about the colour problem”(AL, 155).

She describes a native reserve as follows: “long line of single huts, close strips
of cultivation beside it, not an inch of soil wasted, swarms of a million ragged
children- shack that is a school, kids sitting on the mud floor, sometimes there is a
blackboard-and there they all are, happy as anything”. Being educated by a Standard
4 teacher, the entire reserve is so backward that there is neither telephone, nor
radio, nor electric light, nor running water, nor books, nor newspapers. . . “They
might as well be on the moon”(208). The school inspector’s frustration due to his
inability to improve things in Africa comes out in the form of sarcastic invective
against the hopeless situation where the Natives are not even aware of the extent of
their pathetic degradation and their complacency in the face of it. He tells them
about upliftment and civilisation and the swarms of happy children smile and wave
him goodbye. What makes him more unhappy than anything else is that they have
no comprehension of their wretched condition. Although there is always an attempt
to understand historical processes through the perspective of social realism in
Lessing’s work her ability to move beyond history to an arena that is really myth
country lends to it a dimension of timelessness that gives it universality. Besides,
human beings, hopeless due to their basic character which makes them victims of
circumstances fired her imagination to such an extent that they became thematic
preoccupations, consistently evoked through recurrent motifs in her works.
Through them she tries to understand truths about the human predicament that she
finds both difficult and elusive.

The account of the Whartons, (in Going Home) the Socialist trade-union leader
who was transformed through circumstance into a man fully disillusioned and thus
completely changed is a case in point. This family quickly moves towards misery as
a third child is born. A spastic, adored by both parents, he is continually ill and in
need of medical attention which means lots of bills. A fourth child is born and the
mother, now tired and harassed, refused to sleep with her husband . . “went into
bed beside Robbie, the sick boy, as if she were married to him”(239). As a result
much bitterness crept into the relationship. The other children, though protective
towards the sick boy, naturally resented him too because it was obvious to them
that the mother’s love went out only to the sick child while she was merely irritable
with them. While they felt wronged they also felt they had done wrong in being
born healthy and normal. And then there was the beginning of another child, from
the warmth between the Whartons on a drunken night. Alice cannot accept this,
uses a knitting needle, violently aborting the foetus and nearly killing herself. She
can have no more children which she perceives as the “one bright thing in her life,”
repeats it loudly before the children till they look helplessly at each other, “trying to
share the awful guilt of being born at all”(239). Although things got worse he was
strong still, his job as an official in the trade-union enough to keep Wharton
together . . “It was the one thing that held him in his idea of himself, and connected
him with Britain, where he had such hopes for the future. “At home though there
was the nagging wife, exhausted because of a helpless fettering to the forever sick child. The situation, complicated by the colour question, became progressively worse. Afraid of changes in rules that may allow Blacks to do skilled work, and thus the continuous fear of unemployment, he was further confused because uncertain about his feelings. With experience of trade-unionism in Britain he knew it was unfair to want the Blacks to stay out of work and so he consoled himself by arguments like, “After all they arn’t on our level, are they?...It’s not so bad as it is for us, being hard up: we’re civilised, arn’t we; they arn’t civilised yet, are they” (242)? Financially for him things worsened, with more medical bills. Self-esteem too suffered severe blows with needs to accept charity on losing his job after a re-election. Having been a Socialist all his life, now with clear understanding born of his own hopeless situation he began to feel and say things he should have known all along. “Capital. Capital was what he needed. It was not fair that capitalists had capital and the working man had not” (243).

And then there is a little turn in the story of the Whartons, when sunk to the lowest depths of hopelessness he meets and is taken up by Mr. McCarren-Longman a-spiv-of-sorts. McCarren-Longman is spiv with a difference “Because a spiv is someone who consciously deludes his victims. But this man believes in every word he says” (246). Unwilling to listen to reason, Wharton sinks further into the morass of debt in the hope of improving his lot by indulging in Longman’s speculative and foolish schemes. Bob Wharton is found drunk and dead, one morning, fallen on the dark stairs at night. Autobiography, memory and reality mingle as the story of the Whartons is told, imagination creatively reshaping myths in the retelling.
What follows has larger implications and goes to support this thesis. Lessing writes: “it might be useful to wonder which of the idealisms that make our hearts beat faster will seem wrongheaded to people a hundred years from now”(AL 3). There is both cynical knowledge as well as honesty in her writing that persuades her to acknowledge such truth, accept it and move on. She writes of Communism in what is a kind of postscript to Going Home, in 1967. Giving reasons for her beliefs in communism- and when she wrote this work she was a communist- she writes, "When I became political and Communist they were the only people I had ever met who fought the colour- bar in their lives”(311). She was impressed with their common-sensical views on racism and their courage and humanity to practise them. She returns to Communism in the 80's, in The Good Terrorist, however, only to subvert it. Her attitudes and beliefs have changed over the years and the process of undermining that goes on throughout this novel is indicative of her changed response to this doctrine. In Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage too there was disillusionment and disenchantment but here there is real debunking. Lessing's works appear always as attempts towards integration, cohesion. They manifest chaos, cracking up, an awareness of meaninglessness and potential for a slide into nullity. The underlying structure of The Golden Notebook , written during the time when the twin processes of engagement and disillusion with communist ideology were at work (the novel focusses simultaneously on an exploration of sexual relations, creativity and chaos too) aims towards wholeness, Anna reorganizing and slotting experience into intelligible parts in order to stave off confusion. Anna's attempts to seek that elusive totality which will give meaning to life are reflected in her need for communism :
Somewhere at the back of my mind when I joined the party was a need for wholeness, for an end to the split, divided, unsatisfactory way we all live. Yet joining the Party intensified the split - not the business of belonging to an organization whose every tenet, on paper, anyway, contradicts the ideas of the society we live in; but something much deeper than that" (GN 171).

She continues: "When you joined the Communists you met, for the first time, people of other races and on equal terms. It was for this reason the Communist Party had influence not because of its theories" (311). While writing the postscript she has become an ex-communist, and there is something similar in the two positions. "I've long since understood what it was like being a communist in a certain time and place" believing that it cannot be understood by no one who was not... "I'm grateful to the Communists for what they taught me; particularly about power, the realities of political power" (311).

Lessing thinks of who the communists in Rhodesia were, was there a real CP there, and the answer is no. It was first a small scattered group of like-minded people, engaged in the long, thankless, draining battle against colour bars and white supremacy. Their interest was fueled by the stories of the Russian revolution. She writes:

if you are living in a country which is stifling, backward and provincial and you are a lively idealistic person, you need something to buoy you up. For many people, in many parts of the world, this idealistic flame was Russia. Your local conditions may be primitive - but somewhere is good the truth, progress. Your neighbours think you are mad and treacherous kaffir-lovers—but in other parts of the world you have friends, even if you don't know
their names. No one should laugh at this, or think it childish who has not lived in a backwater full of neurotic and bigoted racists (313).

In African Laughter, she writes of Capricorn, not a political party but a group that deplores racial prejudice and suggests ways to eradicate the colour bar. She expresses hope in the situation that here in this country Whites can at times sit around the same table as Blacks and even listen to them. Yet, the reality behind such outward shows of understanding and harmony is exposed when words and situations reveal that actually that precious place in the sun will never belong to the African just as he can never hope to seize the means of control.

Another significant issue is that of Franchise. Although they are all hungry for the vote the point made is that perhaps the preveliged alone will be allowed the right. Democracy, Parliament and the vote may be tarnished in Europe; but here in Africa the vote is a symbol of equality. In the face of a system that has been imposed by the white man upon the black man, it is still a valid indicator of human dignity. In Europe, the colour of a person’s skin has never helped to determine his/her right to dignity. The difference is that when the African there asks for the vote he is asking for more than it has ever meant in Europe. At the end of the postscript Lessing writes of the need to choose one’s battle ground while one is also aware of what one considers important values. Democracy, liberty, the individual are all entities being increasingly threatened by the increasing poverty of the world which spends money on armaments rather than development, by approaching mass hunger and the reality of war.

In Going Home, Lessing said that having set herself to dream, she could recapture consciously and at will any bits of her African past. That she chose Africa,
the real country and what her past in it meant for her pervades her work. Tangible to her even in absence Africa was the bedrock of her self because Africa made her what she was. She writes, for instance, in *Going Home* that she may not have come to Communism if it were not for her crucial experience of the colour bar in racist Africa. Her faith and reliance in the truth of dream too was in a sense evoked by the large, open and empty expanse of the African country. . . empty enough to dream in. Her father would sit under the huge empty African sky, endless stars evocative of eternity. In fact, major themes for Lessing’s later fiction seem to have already emerged from these enormities of space. An old prospector who has been wandering around Africa for all his life, angry with people who want to change it, says, “when the world’s filled up, we’ll have to get hold of a star. Any star. Venus, or Mars. Get hold of it and leave it empty. Man needs an empty space somewhere for his spirit to rest in”(*GH* 12). It is significant in such a context that Lessing soars into explorations of space in *Canopus in Argos: Archives*. Such a landscape, with its breath taking wild bush full of game was to Lessing simultaneously real and mythical. The “dark stuffy bungalow” on a hill always “steeped in moonlight, starlight, sunlight and aired by the hundred winds of earth and sky” seems to belong to a strange world of the past (*AL* 426). As she leaves Zimbabwe after the 1989 visit she catches a glimpse of the past - “all our pasts” says she relegating Africa to a kind of primeval realm of eternity, Africa, the mythical Dark Continent.

A pattern can be like a myth, in its ability to make suggestions, its potential for reverberation. One such image sticks in her mind and gets expressed as follows: “in a light-stepping youth returning from a range of low hills, his eyes alert for the
ghosts of vanished game. On his back was a spear, in his hand was a catapult and he was accompanied by three lean hunting dogs” (426).

Lessing's fiction reverberates with questions about identity and her approach is somewhat phenomenological. The keenness of her heroines to find their 'real' selves manifests itself firstly in an effort to shrug off the weight of what they have been. And so Martha, newly arrived in London, when asked her name by a stranger, replies "Phyllis Jones", with an imaginary history of wartime work. The loss of her identity is for her a strange kind of freedom from being herself and the lifting of pressures, which force a person to conform to an image, award an anonymity through which one can be another, or simply be: "For weeks, then, without boundaries, without definition, like a balloon drifting and bobbing, nothing had been expected of her"(4). Often in her work, Lessing writes of situations where freedom from specific roles is necessary so that an individual can glimpse the truth within (or beyond). Truth we know is a double edged sword. Stripped of multiple layers of the role that conceals the person within, sometimes the sense of loss of identity that confronts can be phenomenal. And grim.

Susan Rawlings of the short story "To Room Nineteen", initially lost in the comfortable conformity of her role playing, when dissatisfied and confused, makes the mistake of looking for her real self. She finds an abysmal emptiness which for her is akin to Kurtz's vision of the horror, the Heart of Darkness at the centre. Unable to cope with truth, she moves towards depression before the final slide into suicide. Kate in Summer before the Dark, shrugging off responsibilities that have become burdensome, sets out in search of her true self. Meandering through 'Global Food', scenic Spain, experience with a lover who arouses merely her maternal
instinct and an alterity whose origin lies in dream she finally makes a statement through her hair. Several feminist critics have mocked the denouement of this novel, Kate's self-assertive rebellion seen as half-hearted and thus evidence of her innate weakness rather than real strength. However, if this self-assertion is recognized and assessed on its own terms or through Kate's perceptions it retains a validity that can hardly be questioned. Alterity for Kate is refuge and her dream recurs with a sequential continuity that is significant. This dream world confers on Kate a self-image that it confirms by repetition and it is one wherein she is an important person. It sets up a binary against the real world which has been increasingly reductive of her self-esteem making her feel strangely irrelevant. Detailed discussion of this novel has been undertaken in Chapter Two.

An increasing alterity and existence on an alternate plane may perhaps be different ways of perceiving the state of madness, Lessing suggests, for what is insanity if not a loss of contact with the real world or reality as commonly perceived. Many women of Lessing's canon seem to need this 'other' reality in order to make sense of themselves and to be able to lead outwardly normal lives during which they cope efficiently. The experience of living her 'other' life in Room Nineteen is for Susan Rawlings in a sense necessary so that once the needs of the individual within have been met she can be far more cheerful playing her many roles, the reality she has to live with. In the short story though this does not heal her fragile self permanently, as it does in some of the novels. Seen in another sense perhaps it does, since it helps Susan find herself and decide what her real needs are. In the early works, as in the short story or the first novel the indulgence in alterity leads to disintegration and apathy. In later works though, and interestingly, this is
the period of Lessing's deep engagement with Laingian psychoanalysis, disorientation from reality with a consequent need for a private niche is a healing device which saves the protagonists from complete mental collapse. Martha in *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*, Anna/Ella in the *The Golden Notebook*, Kate in *The Summer Before the Dark* and the narrator in *Memories of a Survivor* undergo various social and psychological pressures. Yet, the states through which they pass are instrumental in providing special insights, fresh knowledge about the self. It is this understanding that eventually unconsciously and partially though, leads to a reconciliation and an acceptance not earlier possible.
NOTES


