CHAPTER SIX: A POSTSCRIPT

Doris Lessing has been called the most fearless woman novelist in the world, unabashed ex-communist, uncompromising feminist too. She believes that putting a label on something is a way of stopping thinking about it, thus she thinks it much better to pose questions rather than expound opinions. Described as "serenely unmistakably feminine, a small woman with delicate features and huge grey eyes that seem to refract light", she said in 1969, "People say I am bleak about being a woman, but that isn't true. I'm bleak about being a human being. We talk about the disasters of the future. Well, the disasters are happening right now all over the world" (76). To combat them, she believes in extra-sensory perception. She admits that she has the special capacity to conjure "mental pictures", Martha realising after a friend's suicide that she had seen it in her mind before it actually happened. Disturbingly persuasive, from the first novel delineating an African past down to her futuristic space fiction rich in varied versions of Empire, she writes always with conviction, inviting empathy.

In 1996, there is a return to realism, with Love, Again, and the novel has received diverse and conflicting reviews. It depicts the "passions of a pensioner", reiterating disquieting and euphoric responses to romantic love. Sixty-five year old Sarah Durham, founder of The Green Bird theatre, in London, works to produce a play based on the life of a nineteenth century French composer, Julie Vairon. Vairon spent most of her life in an isolated French village, painting and writing music. Discovered after a gap of a century, she became suddenly known and, equally suddenly, just before her wedding, mysteriously died. The theatrical story is the frame within which the life
stories of the “real” characters are played out, while a heady and intellectual ambience is created by the interface between love and play. Although “love” is the central character in the novel, a tone of emotional detachment marks the narrative tone. There is a kind of distance in the storytelling, a coolness and sense of detachment too that almost leads to a lack of conviction in the reader: “This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard”, remarks Hippolyta in A Midsummer Night's Dream, and readers of Lessing may be tempted to say the same upon hearing the plot of Love, Again, whose “frenzied couplings outnumber those of even its Shakespearean inspiration.” The various romances here are all the more wrenching because of their “improbability- and because most of them are not consummated”, wrote a reviewer of the novel(63). This reviewer compares what it terms the “double-tiered storytelling” in this novel to the structure of John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman and A.S. Byatt's Possession, the “melancholy tale of the fictitious Julie acting as a template for the contemporary romances that run aground”(63).

The theme of love in the elderly has been explored in earlier novels, like Summer before the Dark and the Jane Somers novels too, here Sarah deeply lovesick and yearning with physical longing for two men young enough to be her son / grandson. Unable to cope with the frenzied feelings that assail her body, she finally wakes to the realisation that the men are “merely catalysts for a neediness that long predates her”(Bemrose 64). Although it does not quite make sense in the context of the development of this novel, one of Lessing's favourite metaphors appears at the end. A not-so-subtle connection is made between Sarah's love-longings and...
disappointment in her relationship with her mother. A childhood deprived of love, in which the lucky sibling has it all, is portrayed in the form of a scene in the park, a scene that works like an icon. The mother hugs and kisses the infant in the pram all the while that she is nasty, stern-faced, and rudely dismissive towards her four year old daughter: "Oh, leave me alone", snapped the mother, in a voice so irritable and full of dislike it was hard to believe this was the same voice she used to love the baby. And now she used this voice again, rich, full and sexual, and she kissed the baby's neck with an open mouth. She went on loving the baby as if the child did not exist"(Love 332). Sarah sits on a bench in the park watching, silently telling the child:

Hold on, hold on. Quite soon a door will slam shut inside you because what you are feeling is unendurable. The door will stand there shut all your life: if you are lucky it will never open, and you'll not ever know about the landscape you inhabited . . . you will always be disliked, and you will have to watch her love that little creature you love so much because you think that if you love what she loves, she will love you. But one day you'll know it doesn't matter what you do and how hard you try, it is no use. And at that moment the door will slam and you will be free(335).

Under My Skin is rich in similar thoughts and experiences, the pain of being the less loved child, for Lessing, forever raw and open like a festering sore. An old essay by the famous novelist mentions early sibling rivalry, when out shooting in the "wild, uninhabited paradise for sportsmen", the miles of African bush, on one occasion she was able to "pluck off" a bird from a low branch where it sat, she wrung its neck and
later explained to people at home that the bullet had struck its beak and stunned it, saying casually too that "it sounded very like one of my brother's tortuous feats."^4 Always anxious to draw attention to herself, trying to attain the mother's love that had unconditionally belonged to her son, Lessing texts display this sense of hurt and unfulfilled desire.

Claire Sprague observes that the most important structural metaphor in the novels is the city, which can be geometrically ordered, chaotically "gridded, and centreless, or organic, and tumultously evolving."^5 She notices, in Lessing's fictional forms imbedded "antifictions", and a burgeoning of characters, plots and thematic implications. A review of the book interestingly extends Sprague's description of London to encapsulate the notion of Lessing's fiction too: "It denies perfection and celebrates change, validating the palimpsestic nature of history and human experience"(13).

The manner in which Lessing moves from the individual and personal to the collective and finally to timeless universals is revelatory of her innate vision. Besides, her many personas, all in pursuit of chimerial goals, are indicative of her desire and struggle to authenticate herself by rooting in stable identities. It becomes obvious through these explorations that the most elusive entity is that of truth, the most unreliable truth of all being fact. Reality then is mere construction. It is for this reason that the form used in her work is so significant, its dynamism and state of flux suggestive of a world always in the making. Her personas too are forever becoming, never really there. A sense of open-endedness then persists in Lessing's writing while it remains simultaneously circular as well.
Contradictions, confusions, dichotomies and paradoxes belong to the gamut of Doris Lessing's fictional world just as the dialectical principle is the cornerstone of her imaginative impulse. All statements then are true only for the moment from which they emerge. A dogma is a statement with a claim that it is true forever, thus any belief in dogma presupposes that life will never change. Lessing's world rests on the contention that reality is forever in flux, life an evanescence. In such a context evolution is the key, freeing from dogma the eternal secret, the crux then lying in the affirmatory potential of the moment. The Sufis speak of celebrating the moment too. Accepting its validity will preclude any belief in it on a forever basis because if belief goes beyond the moment it becomes a prison. Viewed in this manner, there is no value in permanence and stability becomes just another name for stasis.

Thus, Lessing's forms are open-ended, easy transitions and interminglings possible between reality and dream, sanity and schizophrenia, realist writing and space fantasy. Ann Snitow tried to seduce those readers back who found the space-fiction dull and pointless, describing her as:

[the] big writer...architectural, mythic, a builder of structures and a projector of worlds on a scale we'd do well to imagine...she has become increasingly uncompromising, experimental and peremptory. She's been stripping off layers of sugar off the pill for years. Now she's down to the bitterest part, the hardest to swallow... real Jonathan Swift for now, this woman has her nerve. Or rather, I'd call it power, and a sense of responsibility that never sleeps...
Sometimes she does drift off into a doze, but even then we can't do better than to sharpen our minds against her nightmares.

The process of writing may be seen as a metaphor for an evanescent world. The manner in which a text reveals itself to a researcher through his/her prolonged engagements with it can sometimes be exhilarating. The process of research pushes towards a conclusion, the question *I say this or that about a text, so what, so what does it mean*, often lurking in the shadows after the examiners' reports come in and the defence is done. I asked myself to sum up one single thought that stays with me after thousands of pages of reading and two hundred pages of writing. The following presented itself: Both 'Africa' and 'Canopus' connote spaces that Doris Lessing negotiates in multifarious ways through her fiction, while always the four-gated city shines as a goal in the distance, a metaphor for a perfect, and therefore impossible dream. Martha's familiar day-dream, the vision of the ideal city, has remained for me one consistent idea that encapsulates Lessing's vision, my favourite passage the following:

She looked away over the ploughed land, across the Dumfries Hills, and refashioned that unused country to the scale of her imagination. There arose, glimmering and whitely over the harsh scrub and the stunted trees, a noble city, set foursquare and colonnaded along its falling, flower-bordered terraces. There were splashing fountains, and the sound of flutes; and its citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together; and these groups of elders paused, and smiled with pleasure at the sight of the children-the blue-eyed, fair-
skinned children of the North playing hand in hand with the bronze-skinned
children of the south. Yes, they smiled and approved these many-fathered
children, running and playing among the flowers and the terraces, through the
white pillars and tall trees of this fabulous and ancient city. . .(MQ 11)

It is significant that today Lessing lives on and needless to say, writes on. In the
face of a perpetually changing reality, the scope of which is forever expanding and
seeking modification, there can be no concluding remarks. Besides, in the light of this
novelist’s vision it will always be premature to speak in terms of finalities.
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