Novelists are product of their times, and their immediate society is the principal subject of their work. As any society changes its social structure and its economic base, its artefacts are recreated within it. Situating her fiction in that soft ground where the balance between man and society is lost, Lessing portrays the individual in its ceaseless interaction with social and political forces. *Children of Violence* is Martha’s epic struggle against various collectives till she learns to counter her narrow prejudices and evolve a humane outlook.

Lessing’s hard, analytic intelligence directs itself not only to the identity of “I” but to “We” as well. Her fiction most keenly questions our morality and spirituality as human beings, and asking this question cuts to the centre of contemporary cultural paranoia and ideological vacuum.

With the changing times it has come to be realized that it is no longer possible to create a politics-free fictional universe. Writers all over the world acknowledge this bitter truth. Lessing, due to her Rhodesian background and her involvement with leftist politics, brings a sharply developed political
sense to fiction. During the mid '50s, which is more or less the gestation phase for *Children of Violence* sequence, Lessing was specially preoccupied with the correlation between individual and political groups. In the entire sequence she calls up the nightmares old and new which shadow humanity: imperialism, colonialism, communism and capitalism. But her political vision is never allowed to override her human concerns. Without discounting the limitations of the writer, she takes politics for what it is: “To express it poetically politics is not as the beating of wings. And the writer is nothing but an isolated voice in the wilderness. Many hear it, most pass by.”

In *Children of Violence* Lessing has treated politics as “a distinctive mode of social existence, with values and manners of its own”—the only possible way by which it would not produce a jarring note in a work of art. Her searching gaze takes in this dimension more directly in *Martha Quest* and *A Ripple from the Storm*, somewhat tangentially in *Landlocked*, and as an inescapable and gross reality of the present in *The Four-Gated City*. Sufficient supporting material gleaned from her environment and a unique sensitivity enable Lessing to voice in her novels traumas of modern world and the fear of humanity’s destiny. Even when writing out of her own intense experience, she is at the same time writing out of the spirit of the times. In the sequence, Lessing leaves the “personal” behind with *A Ripple from the Storm*; till *Landlocked*, however, she is capturing reality only in the past tense. With *The Four-Gated City* she tries to capture simultaneously the concreteness and insubstantiality of the present.

In relation to Lessing, one must slightly expand the meaning of “real”; it cannot be taken simply as “actual,” or physically visible reality. For her, reality includes the dreams and the unspoken things and the fantastic ideas people have. As one of the leading proponents of social commitment and nineteenth-century realism, Lessing looks upon realistic mode as “the highest form of prose writing.” She says:
I define realism as art which springs so vigorously and naturally from a strongly held, though not necessarily intellectually defined, view of life that it absorbs symbolism.³

Her realism includes the anatomised portrayal of society, the analyses of the world situation, and even the community of those whose "sense of reality, that is, their sense of how to conform to the outside world" is either deficient or weak (FGC,547). This plurality of reality reflects itself in the plurality of not just *Children of Violence* but of all her texts. Referring to this multidimensional aspect of her art, Clare Hanson calls her "a radical realist" whose work "belongs, most saliently to the international, transcultural marketplace of post-modern art."⁴

Lessing's social/political realism is also embedded in her concept of the writer's role. She believes a writer to be the voice and vision of those who are inarticulate: "One is a writer at all because one represents, makes articulate, is continuously and invisibly fed by number of people who are inarticulate . . . ."⁵ Each of the two attitudes—the sociologist's and the psychologist's—reflect a half-truth, as Walter Benjamin has pointed out.⁶ In Lessing these two roles blend in the quest for a "whole" truth. To capture the myriad shades of reality, she combines the techniques of a painter and that of a cameraman.

Unlike the American social realists, Lessing's realism is not class-bound. Writers such as Hemingway, John Dos Passos and Steinbeck tend to reflect the sensibility of men and women on the periphery of working class. But Lessing goes beyond the defined categories of class, gender, race and ideology, to grasp the totality of human mental processes and collective consciousness. By virtue of her political conviction and commitment, Lessing has always belonged to the colonized, the oppressed and the revolutionaries.

The main focus of *Children of Violence* is sociological. The foremost premise of her series has been that one cannot bypass the various collectives; rather the way to self-awareness and self-fulfilment lies through these. In trying to grasp the totality of experience in all its contradictory
aspect, Lessing is creating that modern realist literature which is needed "to penetrate with its beam deep into the tangled jungle of our time."

Her attitude to reality is impelled by the same impulse which Erich Heller describes as "the passion of understanding, the desire for rational appropriation, the driving force towards the expropriation of the mystery." To this effect the sordidness of reality is neither distorted nor mitigated. Lessing's "loving anger," to use Dee Seligman's phrase, comes through even when she is writing of the political/social paradoxes of Southern Africa. Seligman also notes her wonderful capacity "to push into the restrictive shape of fiction such a recalcitrant piece of reality." This remains as true for the London and its people that Lessing selects to depict.

The nature of power-politics, its pervasiveness, has always fascinated Lessing. The tendency to subdue and subjugate is latently there in virtually all human beings. At a wider and more damaging plane, it is expressed in the whites' desire to dominate and dehumanise their subjects which, to Lessing, is an unfortunate betrayal of humanity and a personal embarrassment. Likewise, a slight turn of the screw—the pressures of time or obdurate mental attitudes—can transform personal relationships into an arena for power-display. Thus the personal, too, is engulfed in the political. What happens in the case of Martha and Douglas merely reflects Lessing's misgivings about the altered expectations in gender relationships. Her search for enduring values leads her to consider different variations of man-woman equation.

Equally paramount for Lessing have been societal inequities which are, perhaps, seen at their most severe in a racist state. This differentiation when intersecting with the fragmentary nature of experience results in a split vision at an individual plane and a divisive system at a collective plane. Through the five volumes, Lessing traces viable modes to integrate compartmentalized or prejudiced thinking. The desirable conclusion is that politics, sexuality, culture, sanity cannot be dissociated from basic humanity.
Lessing's attempt to counterbalance art as the language of reality and the impersonality of political discourse, which articulates the ideology of the party, is reflected in *The Ripple from the Storm*. Although Lessing remains indebted to communism for the socialist content of her vision, her disillusionment with it propels her towards those fantastic modes which explore the universe beyond the abortive "isms" of the twentieth century.

The war in Europe has brought a permanent shadow to Lessing's vision, colouring both her politics and her sense of the future of humanity. And Martha, like most of us, carries this shadows permanently with her, as she carries the fading imprints of a political faith. This points to a significant strand of the sequence—the realization that ideologies like communism and socialism can collapse.

The physical destruction of World War I and World War II is paralleled by an emotional destruction that extends and deepens beyond wars. The scarred victims of the "Great Unmentionable" are represented in the figures of Mr. and Mrs. Quest while the psychic dislocation and the disenchantment of a whole generation is depicted in *Landlocked*, and carried forward to *The Four-Gated City*. The anguish caused by shattered hopes is aggravated by the birth of nuclear age with its possible outcome in the global destruction.

It is in *The Four-Gated City* that Lessing is really able to touch "the pulse of now" (*FGC,488*). Besides analysing the socio-political environment of about half a century, Lessing also brings under close scrutiny the terrors and confusions that await when "reality," the fabric of this world, bursts, and a person enters the other/inner world.

The vision that surfaces in the whole series is both personal to Martha and general to the whole body of Lessing's work. The racial integration and unification that is implicit in Martha's reveries in the first volume, and becomes a mutated fictional possibility in *The Four-Gated City*, reflects Lessing's distaste for the imperialist discourse. At the same time, it reveals her quest for the noble virtues of social justice and equality.
In the futuristic note of *The Four-Gated City*, Lessing is trying to see beyond her own observation given to Anna in *The Golden Notebook*: “Literature is analysis after the event” (231). It manifestly expresses her commitment to realism while voicing some of that existential/political doubt as to the literature’s capacity to convey the physical quality of life. One persistent theme of the fifth volume, as of *The Golden Notebook*, is a suspicion of literature and of the writer: Mark’s books, their reception by the public and interpretation by the critics express the fear that language and literary form might distort the current reality and make nostalgia or history of it. Lessing tries to break through this delimiting notion by experimenting with premonitory ideas.

The text of all the volumes provides ample proof of Lessing’s remarkable social-political consciousness. Her undiluted criticism of the harsh realities of today implicates man in general, but she does not spare even herself and shares in the century’s guilt when she says:

> A nastier race of savages has never been seen anywhere, but we put up with them because the rest of us were left in peace from the absurd game of playing enemies. The enemy was Russia. Then... the enemy became China... we had to have an enemy, so the war against communism (or against capitalism) was fought with all the mankind’s wealth, and with psychopaths and sadists and those who wanted to die before they had to. And the rest of us crept about minding our own business; and I and some other fools played God saving handfuls of the homeless and starving while we allowed our governments to make certain the death of whole nations (*FGC*, 664).

These insightful words from the final pages of *The Four-Gated City* illustrate Lessing’s social/political realism in a single broad sweep. Simultaneously, they echo her deepest concerns. They sum up the fear and anxiety implicit in the very title—Children of Violence. They forespeak of what has surely emerged as central to Lessing’s work—her critique of humanism. They also indirectly foretell of her involvements with the ameliorating and assuaging activities which become the source-material for works like *And the Wind Blows Away Our Words* (1987), a travelogue and first hand report of the sufferings of war-worn Afghan muhjahideens.
This brings us to the question of the writer’s commitment, which nowadays claims to be inseparable from literature itself. Max Adereth explains it in terms of the fast-moving reality which cannot be understood without involvement in the profound crisis of modern civilization—the dilemma that we face in this age of nuclear energy: total annihilation or harmonious existence.10

Lessing’s commitment is not to any political ideology—communism is rejected in *Children of Violence* for the simple reason that ideology reflects hardening of attitude. Her commitment in the sequence, as in other works, is to other people in the world because they share the same world and are threatened by the same terrors. The integrity of Lessing as a writer lies in her faith in the enduring nature of the human sympathy and in her humane concern for the meaningful survival of the human race. Thus her commitment is on a much larger scale, politically based and unconfined by exclusive interest in British society. Above all, it seeks to project in her works what she calls “a kind of ‘largeness of attitude,'”11 by which she means an openness of approach and an adaptability to change.

After *The Four-Gated City*, the individual's quest for better, truer vision becomes progressively alienated from the realistic perspective, the seeds of which are sown in the “Appendix”. This shows Lessing’s desire to pass beyond the specifics and anchors of fiction. The “Appendix” is a possible reality; it is realistic and conventional in texture and syntax, if not in incident. The change of style and tone in *The Four-Gated City* is more due to the changing outer reality and less due to her changing imperatives. Randall Stevenson views this shift as “representative of more general rejection and modification of conventional forms in British fiction in the sixties.”12

Between 1971 and 1974, her novels delve in the subconscious: mystical intensity is looked upon as the fountainhead of perception. During this phase she takes the world of human inwardness as the only real world. In 1979, with *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series, she completely turns her
back to realism by inventing a cosmos where virtually anything is possible in the individual's struggle with self and the collective.

That all the connections have been always there in Lessing's consciousness is evident in the words that Martha uses to justify Mark's sudden emotional and ideological swings:

Mark is rather consistent really; he has always followed his own line—there's an emotional logic in it. What changes is—zeitgeist, whatever word you want (FGC.328).

Lessing, here, may well be speaking for herself, stating her own stance. But her stint with the metaphysical—in the realm of speculative fiction—seems to have been over: she has reverted to realism with *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and political determiners once again surface with full force.

Lessing, however, has never digressed from her basic major concerns—the strife between good and evil, the individual versus the collective. The chaos of the world is always observed from a humanist social perspective. While investigating the afflictions of the present world, she identifies herself with those forces of her time which will one day prevail. The deeper question that Lessing raises in *Children of Violence* is that of the commitment to humanity—a commitment that can motivate political involvement and can remain even if political commitment proves futile.
NOTES


