Sexual Politics

"The relationship between the sexes everywhere, not just in Western society, is so much of a melting pot, that it's like the color bar, all kinds of emotions that don't belong get sucked in."¹

Without underplaying Lessing's larger concerns, the statement echoes the note of politics that has permeated through the gender-relationships as well. Gender consciousness and sexual differences are firmly embedded within men and women's perception of the socio-cultural reality. The whole semiotic repertoire of a society cannot escape what the Marxist linguist V.N. Volosinov has called the "multiaccentuality of social conflict and inequality."

Roland Barthes is a little more explicit when he says:

One must naturally understand political in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole human relationships in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world . . . .³

Since Lessing is chiefly concerned with exploring the connection between the individual and the collective, the gender-based attitudes automatically form an inseparable part. Children of Violence examines not only the nature of black experience under white rule and the validity of the left-wing politics,
but also the position of women in a man's world. Some critics, such as Randall Stevenson,⁴ have seen this as the central theme of the sequence. This could be because Lessing's major works invariably include an exposition of the complex ways in which men and women organize their interpersonal relationships. Where gender inequities form one aspect of Lessing's artistic polyvalence, they also reflect, as Mona Knapp's reading of Lessing's works reveal, that "there can be no women's cause independent of humanity's social and political causes on the whole."⁵

Talking about Lessing's art, one can say that the novel for her is a form "which women writers have used to question and challenge men's appropriation of women's experience."⁶ Moreover, it is an alternative mode for voicing "the attitudes of mind they [the male writers] took for granted" and therefore did not reflect in their texts.⁷ What Simone de Beauvoir, Juliet Mitchell and Kate Millett have done in the sphere of feminist thought and criticism, Lessing does in fiction by giving all the space to female experience. Her texts boldly depict women—Martha, Anna, Molly, Kate—who are trying to deconstruct the myth of male sovereignty, women who are trying to come out of the margins and occupy the "subject" position. The attitudes of the characters—male and female—their sexual and emotional relationships, and Lessing's portrayal of gender-tensions expose the peculiar politics of gender.

About the development of her perceptions which cause her to focus on nearly all women-related issues, in *Children of Violence* particularly and somewhat less centrally in *The Four-Gated City*, Lessing retorts: "It would be enough to say I'm a woman, after all?"⁸

An overview of gender delineations in the works of the past women writers vividly reveals a shift⁹ in perspective and attitude from Jane Austen, Brontës, George Elliot to the contemporary women novelists. The limited approach of the earlier writers can be ascribed to a certain kind of sexual politics: the temper of their society being such that they had to submit to men's view of them as women and as writers.
A point of feminine politics is again implicit in the changed outlook of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf: in their works there is a resistance to the critique of narrative that embodies assumptions which are inimical to women’s language and experience. Insights of the kind we get from Doris Lessing, particularly her uninhibited approach, have as much to do with a new climate of opinion since the First World War as with Lessing’s own peculiar situation—that of an outsider and a bilingual writer. A lot of significance has been given to this fact by critics like Jane Miller, Jeannette King and Lorna Sage. Relating it to the growing awareness among writers of the political implications of their experience and their accounts of it, Miller holds:

That awareness was always incipiently there, but in England at least it took writers . . . who came to British culture from colonial variants of it, to show that sexual relations and their inequities were continuous with other forms of social relationship and depended on assumptions underlying imperialism and capitalism in both societies they knew.

In Lessing’s context, this aspect (of writing from the margins of Western culture) has much to do with the kind of openness depicted in her fiction right from the beginning, in the 1950s. The strange blend of rebelliousness and conformism that she imparted to the Martha of the first four volumes is firmly entrenched in her gender awareness. Besides asserting her femininity, Martha’s friendship with her political mentors—the Cohen brothers—serves the purpose of shocking her mother’s racial snobbery and English sense of propriety. Through it she challenges what V.J. Seidler has termed the “dynamic of repression that has been used as an integral part of social control.”

As it is, Martin Green has quite emphatically stressed that Martha’s adolescence is dominated by two ideologies, namely eroticism and revolution. More appropriate to the total semantic structure, however, is the Martha personifies the individual fated to walk alone in the search for knowledge and experience. It is this alienation that Martha fights against; and her chosen modes are politics and sexuality. Even out of these two,
sexuality is more at the centre of her experience. Green and Sydney Janet Kaplan's analyses correspond to this view. Her rebellion, no doubt, starts on the basis of abstract ideas, but "it is through her body—as she later experiences sexual relationships, pregnancy and childbirth—that her most profound discoveries were achieved."14

The Personal is Political

Feminist understanding of sexual and social relations requires that women must start from what they know of their own lives—"that personal knowledge is potentially political knowledge, though it may be pre-political in the sense of being untheorised and ungeneralised embedded still in women's peculiar isolation."15 Lessing, in her novels, repeatedly demonstrates the inseparability of the personal and the political. The Grass in Singing considers this relationship in terms of sexual identity and racial identity. The first four volumes of Martha Quest sequence scan their interconnection through the by-ways of African situation, gender-currents, communist ideology and eroticism. The Four-Gated City, being concerned with more immediate threats to the contemporary world, broadens the scope by questioning the state encroachment on the private sphere and by probing the related question of individual autonomy.

The division between the "private" realms has been challenged by the feminist focus on sexual politics and the perception integral to it, that "the personal is political." Like all abbreviated and much used statements, this too has had to carry a wide range of meanings. The underlying point is that "if all aspects of our lives are up for question, then nothing is outside the political sphere."16 Here it would be appropriate to clarify that the phrase "the personal is political" is being used as an all inclusive construct—to emphasize that the ideological and institutional apparatus has more and more role to play in shaping not only one's social status but general existence as well.
Lessing takes the phrase to mean somewhat in Heidi Hartmann’s sense that “woman’s supposedly personal problems, rather than reflecting her own inadequacy, stem from a collective oppression originating in the imbalance of power between the sexes.”17 The area of influence of these collective forces overlaps gender intricacies, sexuality and role-crisis.

The significance of sexual politics to the whole narrative scheme is evident from the first few pages of Martha Quest: the very act of reading Havelock Ellis is suggestive (MQ.9-10). It is intended to express Martha’s rebelliousness while hinting at the changing spirit of the times; her defiance is directed at once against her closed colonial upbringing and her still dormant sexuality. Thus it brings the personal within the political. Simultaneously, the world of books and ideas that she has created around herself is a revolt against role-playing—socially imposed role of an “adolescent white girl” belonging to the dominant class.

Feminists generally take personal-is-political to mean collectivization of experience which is a hallmark of corporate capitalism and which leaves nothing to individual choice. Describing the cult of collectivization among the younger lot of the colony in pre-war period, Lessing says: “The public: it was all so public, anything was permissible, the romance, the flirtations, the quarrels, provided they were shared” (MQ.188). Similar indirect control of the individual mind is evident in day-to-day, mundane affairs: for example, the choice of a “face” for a certain occasion. Martha’s efforts to acquire a suitable appearance for the left-group meeting are accompanied by Lessing’s incisive comment: “What social current, flowing through such devious channels, reached this room . . .” (MQ.156). Likewise, the notion of body, the concept of physical dimensions, is also “given”: the monitoring factor is standard approximation “laid down by the idea of what is desirable” (MQ.193;299). Consciously or unconsciously, the individual is all the time succumbing to the power of these unseen forces that determine the norms for the society.
Interwoven with the theme of *Children of Violence* is the frightening potential of public events to superimpose themselves on the pattern of personal life. The sequence demonstrates in virtually every volume that political/historical events—of distant past as well as those in closer proximity—go on influencing the quality of life and world-views. The note at which *A Proper Marriage* concludes, connects the two—political and personal—at the individual as well as at the collective level. Mr. Maynard’s parting shot to Martha, who is the deserting wife, is: “I suppose with the French Revolution for a father and the Russian Revolution for a mother, you can very well dispense with a family” (*PM*, 380). Subsuming the personal completely in the political, Lessing provides a remarkable summation of Martha’s progression in *Landlocked*:

> Every fibre of Martha’s body, everything she thought, every movement she made, everything she was, was because she had been born at the end of one world war, and had spent all her adolescence in the atmosphere of preparations for another . . . Martha was the essence of violence, she had been conceived, bred, fed and reared on violence (*LL*, 242).

The linking of these two has a significance for the creative writer’s craft as well: it considerably influences both the content and the narrative strategy. Placing the personal and the political face to face serves as a potent stylistic device, and Lessing uses it to criticise and question the established beliefs and institutions. For Martha, we are told, the wedding ceremony was a door to romantic love. At the same time, she thought of it “as an unimportant formula that must be gone through for the sake of society” (*MQ*, 308). Likewise, the area of romance, which is consistently subjected to demythologization, gets coloured with political overtones when the courting pair (Douglas-Martha) use it as a banner: “. . . making love when and how they pleased was positively a flag of independence in itself, a red and defiant flag, waving in the face of the older generation” (*MQ*, 320).

The narrative strategies are underpinned by another method Lessing uses to stress the links between the personal and the political. In the politically explosive conditions of Southern Africa—where every white
women is feared to be a potential rape victim (MQ,57)—the feminist avowal
that personal circumstances are directly structured by public factors
gathers greater force. The interlocking structures of gender, race and power
further accentuate the complexities of a woman’s position—be it in Africa or
in a European society. It fairly well substantiates Hartsock’s argument that
points to wider implications: “each of the interlocking institutions of
capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy condition the other.”20

The overlapping of the political and the personal once again gets
highlighted in the way the whole social machinery comes into action when
Martha’s decision to leave Douglas becomes known. It reveals how
fundamentally antipathetic the institutionalised society is to any individually
willed gesture. Martha feels mentally assaulted:

This did frighten her. She drove down . . . in a state of pure terror. It
was not of Douglas, but of society. She could see her mother-in-law,
her own mother, Mrs. Talbot, the Maynards, massed behind him
(PM,340).

So deep and pervasive has become the influence of politics that one seeks
political parallels to explicate personal situations. Political jargon and
imagery seep into the stream of thought, and condition even the mental
processes. Martha finds points of likeness between “self-displaying hysteria”
of Douglas and “the shrill, maudlin self-pity” of a political leader in the
Zambesia News:

For there was a connection, she felt. Not in her own experience, nor
in any book, had she found the state Douglas was now in. Yet
precisely the same note was struck in every issue of the local
newspaper—goodness betrayed, self-righteousness on exhibition,
heartless enemies discovered everywhere (PM,368).

Long before feminist theories came into force, Lessing gave Martha
not only a heightened awareness of her body and sexuality (as part of the
quest for her real self), but also the right to assert her will in the area of
male dominance. Lessing is the product of that peculiar situation to which
contributed a number of factors21—one very significant being the
publication of works such as Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex and
Germaine Greer’s The Female Eunuch. The impact of Freud and Jungian
theories is undeniable: in *The Four-Gated City* and *The Golden Notebook*, Anna and Martha’s visits to psychoanalysts form an essential part of their efforts at self-knowledge. The influence of Lawrence, too, cannot be discounted. This provides sufficient artistic and ideological base for probing individual consciousness through sexuality. And as she writes “from inside a women’s viewpoint,” it is the female self and sexuality that gets ample space. The political thus intervenes in this highly intimate sphere too. Foucault’s observation elucidates it further:

> The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.

Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* and Lawrence in *Lady Chatterlay’s Lover* had, no doubt, opened up some of the hidden regions of female experience. Lessing continues the tradition by illuminating unpalpable aspects of sexual and domestic life, without resorting to understatements or linguistic subtleties. That is why she is considered among “the vanguards of modernity, of permissiveness.”

For Martha, sexuality is a medium to reach out to universal consciousness; it is best depicted in the instinctive rapport between Thomas Stern and Martha:

> Perhaps, when Thomas and she touched each other, in that touch cried out the murdered flesh of the millions of Europe—the squandered flesh was having its revenge, it cried out through the two little creatures who were fitted for much smaller loves . . .” (*LL*, 199).

Here even the theme of violence gets intertwined with sexuality. A perfectly harmonious sexual experience is seen as an expiation and atonement for the humanity's sin of war and violence. The ground for this idea is prepared in *Martha Quest* (74-75) where Martha’s uniquely “ecstatic experience” causes her to feel “a slow integration” with the nature around. A moment only half comprehended in the text, it makes certain demands on Martha and on the reader to accept “something quite different . . . something quite new.” That “something different” is the transexperiential nature of Thomas-Martha.
affair. There is another dimension to them: more than cultural, they appear archetypal figures—proverbial Adam and Eve, divested of their Eden for the sins of their kind, and so fated to suffer. Lessing treats them in such away that in their togetherness they come to represent the conscience of their time:

The soul of human race, that part of the mind which has no name . . . which holds the human race as frogspawn is held in a jelly—that part of Martha and Thomas was twisted and warped, was part of a twist and a damage" (LL, 243)

Once again the "atonement motif" cannot be negated. Simultaneously, it brings out that for Lessing private lives—sins and blisses—are aspects of history.

It is because sexuality for her spills over the personal and reaches out to the collective conscience that J. Miller has referred to Lessing's analysis of sex as Marxist.26 Also implied is Lessing's equally authentic treatment of sex as an experience of pain and isolation—an experience of disharmony with self and others. The perception that emerges in Children of Violence is that sexuality and sexual practice, rather than being "natural," are cultural constructs. The observation acquires larger significance in terms of Simone de Beauvoir, who perceives in "the existent a more original 'quest of being,' of which sexuality is only one of the aspects."27 In the novel sequence, true sexual experience is not circumscribed to the "personal" but represents "a leap out of their own skins."28 symbolising man's aspiration to be one with the macrocosm.

Sexuality or sexual relationships implicitly deal with the politics of experience. So much so, it is through her sexuality that Martha becomes conscious of the divisive split in her consciousness—"her unhappy disconnected selves" (PM.75). Her fragmentation typifies the alienated condition of modern life. Martha's predicament—sexual irresponsiveness towards Anton29—acknowledges a crucial contradiction between "the-way-I-feel" and "the-way-I-ought-to-feel." This theme reverberates through many of Lessing's shorter fiction where she tries out different, unconventional
gender-equations to analyse the layers of human experience that are enmeshed with sexuality. “Not a very Nice Story,” “Winter in July,” and “Each Other” explore not sexual inequities but fundamentally incomprehensible nature of gender currents. In some of her stories—“Mrs. Fortesque,” “One off the Short list”—as in *The Grass is Singing*, sexuality is exposed as a statement of male domination, as a weapon used to denigrate females; but in *Children of Violence*, Lessing gives the women her sexuality—and through it her “self”—back to her.\(^{30}\) It is Martha who, feeling deprived in her sexuality, decides to explore other avenues.

The Lessing’s novel-sequence develops a critique of personal relationships goes without saying. There is an attempt to work out the ways through which power operates in private sphere, so that the terms of relationship between “private” and “public” can be reconsidered.

**Power and Subordination**

With varying degrees of emphasis, all Doris Lessing’s novels expose the dynamics of power structure within the ambit of female psyche. In *Children of Violence*, her approach blends two strains: the confrontation politics of a considerate social warrior, and the focus on woman’s consciousness ranging over those areas of thought and experience which had been hitherto relegated to the area of psychology and physiology—the region of “silences” in literature.

The concept of sexual politics is rooted in the idea that all power is political.\(^{31}\) With slight variations but equal emphasis, it is defined as “the system of inter-personal power by means of which individual men dominated individual women.”\(^{32}\) The idea of power and subordination is thus intrinsically woven into the concept.

Lessing’s sexual ideology, however, includes so many nuances, inconsistencies and even ambiguities that the very concept of sexual dominion, as understood by liberal and radical feminists, is inverted.
Power, in her case, does not always rest with men; whatever authority they exercise over women is more due to a "culturally received idea," which proves self-negating when confronted with the changing realities. The narrative details—Martha's own variedly dichotomous behaviour, her constant vacillations between rebellion and conformity, and an oblique search on the part of the author for an enduring, ideal gender-equation—only further complicate an already knotty matter.

Lessing's subject is society, but it is society seen and experienced by a woman. This selective principle at once decides the perspective: Martha being the main focalizer of events in the novel-series, it is through her experience of gender-based situations that we ascertain the workings of "the pompous, hypocritical and essentially male fabric of society" (RFS, 25). This attitude is sharply visible in the patronizingly tolerant stance of the male members of the communist group towards their female comrades. Unable to ignore their femininity (RFS, 99-100), they still look upon them from their "male heights." Letting out a great laugh, a husband ridicules his wife: "Women. She feels it is wrong, and so that's enough" (RF, 91). This same orientation of mind when divested of all humour reveals the grossness of the imperialist society in looking upon the woman as what Beauvoir calls "the incidental, the inessential opposed to the essential." Mr. Maynard's views about Maisie, the unwed mother of his son's child, sound the keynote of the phallocratic ideology. Lessing writes that cycling past him she was just "a body which he saw simply as the casket which housed the heir of his flesh . . . " (RFS, 117). In the same book, one of the female characters uses communist terminology to declaim men boldly as "a lot of conscienceless exploiters of human-labour, arrogant slave-drivers, petty domestic dictators" (RFS, 202). This amply brings to the fore the prevailing power structure within the fabric of society.

The objectification of women, which remains the most potent means of subordination, surfaces in various relationships. In the city, Martha quite unconsciously responds to the power that Donovan's cultural sophistication
seems to exercise over her. It is as a show piece, as an attractive object of display in the colonial culture that Martha appears most meaningful to him (MQ, 142). Impelled by her approval-seeking female self, she willingly submits to his administrations, which are thinly concealed attempts to control her appearance, behaviour and social contacts (MQ, 134-36). Donovan quite clearly represents the Sports Club culture which, while being an epitome of collective control, also projects the patriarchal value-system firmly entrenched in the imperialist ideology. Nothing is left to doubt about the implied meaning of the text in Donovan's patronizing stance: “Well, Matty, I've decided to take you to dance at the Sport Club next Saturday, and risk all; I can see you are tugging at the leash” (MQ, 174).

In this attitude Lessing also exposes the mind-set of a certain kind of men—objectification for them amounts to concentrating on only feminine attributes (MQ, 186-187). The women's (show of) dependence enhances their self-esteem, and their protective-instinct assuages their male-ego. The underlying logic of this behavioural pattern is simple enough, as Susan Brownmiller notes: “Femininity pleases men because it makes them appear more masculine by contrast.” The girls in the Sports Club-set too adhere to the role of pampering, all-experienced “madonnas” conferring an extra portion of unearned gender distinction on men, giving them an unchallenged space in which to feel stronger and more competent (MQ, 186-87). The ultimate objectification of women in that patriarchal society is the idea of “booking a girl up months ahead” (MQ, 145)—thus claiming her as one's own property, and remote-controlling her.

In A Proper Marriage, objectification of women is reflected in Douglas's proprietary attitude towards Martha. His self-satisfaction at having married "the best girl in Africa" (PM, 225) is symptomatic of a possessiveness that reflects back his own sense of achievement. The marriage that had its foundation in romantic idealism ends up in total disillusionment. Martha gradually begins to see through the subtle manoeuvring to which female mind is subjected. In a self-accusatory mood
she thinks, rather confusedly, that “there was always a point when men seemed to press a button, as it were, and one was expected to turn into something else, for their amusement” (PM,14). That women would often submit to this flattering manipulation is the reason that she was “married, signed and sealed away” (PM,14).

Marriage as a social institution and as a personal commitment gets Lessing’s trenchantly critical treatment. Striping it of all notions of an idealistic partnership, Lessing grounds it essentially in physicality (PM,74). More than material circumstances, differing expectations and standpoints, it is due to sexual incompatibility that Martha and Douglas separate (PM,355). Domestic life, in the first four volumes, is described as an arena where all tensions and pulls affecting the social world get localized.

Power is exerted in a multitude of ways in personal life. In Douglas’s desperation, we get to see the subordinating tactics of the wounded male-ego. The assertion of Martha’s individual identity—signing the circulars as “Martha Quest”—threatens her husband’s subject-position. His absoluteness is suddenly at stake when she chooses to mix up with the left-wing politics (PM,334). But the basic reason, as Jasmine accurately pinpoints is “that his property instinct is outraged” (PM,318). Dwelling upon the intimidating tactics of the male, Lessing summarises the whole mechanics of power and subordination:

When a woman left her husband, or threatened to leave him—that is, a woman of her type, who insisted on her rights to behave as a man would—then her husband went through certain actions like an automaton, beginning with confiscating the contraceptives, threatening to make her forcibly pregnant, accusing her of multifarious infidelities, and ending in self-abasing weeping appeals that she should change her mind and stay (PM, 369).

An incisive analysis of some other layers of power and subversion figures in the fourth chapter of part three of A Ripple from the Storm. The focus is on Mrs. Van Der Bylt: a month after her marriage she discovers the futility of looking for a soul-mate in her husband. Mr. Van is what one may call a refined specimen of a “bully”—“a man who needed a great deal of
attention from his wife," who continually summoned her "to play cards with him, to read to him, or arrange his cushions and find his books" (RFS, 207). But instead of retreating into an artificially imposed shell and fighting a losing battle "in the no-man's land between image and truth," Mrs. Van devises a strategy to diffuse his power: "she thereby put herself beyond hurt by him" (RFS, 209). In this way, by attempting to analyse various gender relationships, Lessing demystifies marriage of its connotations of a paradisiacal bliss and projects it as a site of power-struggle.37

Normally the masculine principle is associated with an ethos of superiority, but Lessing refrains from any kind of glorification, either of the male or female principle. One may say that as far as the portrayal of men in women novelists is concerned. Heathcliff has been "the last romantic." His successors are ordinary, non-idealistic, unheroic specimens that abound in the world. Each relationship in The Golden Notebook and Children of Violence (excepting Landlocked) elucidates what Lynn Sukenick calls "the thinness of emotion" on man's part and the fuller feelings and demands on the woman's. According to Lessing, women novelists' men and male novelists' women can be instructive, particularly in their archetypal state.39 Her portrayal of men, as insecure and flawed in their mind and spirit, tends to threaten "the stability of the masculine edifice," as Hélène Cixous likes to call it.40 Reflections, hypotheses put forth in Lessing's major novels, including the latest ones—The Summer before the Dark, The Good Terrorist—are ruinous for the male bastion.

To most of the male characters Lessing gives traditional male attitudes: Douglas, Anton, Donovan, Perry, Adolph are the images of man as oppressor but of a far weaker variety than Hencherd or Rochester. In them are analysed the structure of male-supremacist power. At the same time, their falling short of the accepted gender roles diminishes and deglamorises them.

The ever-changing balance of power and subordination makes demands on individuals, requiring them to take on different roles—out of
social compulsion or personal need. Role-playing in itself means that unreal, stranger-self is all the time empowering the real self. Martha's compulsions are both cultural and personal: partly it is due to her persistent dualism and partly it represents the dilemma of the young women of her age. She constantly oscillates between gender-specific and gender-defying roles. With Douglas, she feels betrayed at being expected to restrict herself to the traditional roles of housekeeping and minding babies (PM,266). But earlier, during their courtship, she had consciously adopted the role of a romantic heroine and a coy seductress. Douglas himself conforms to the ontological and moral pretensions of the males.

Even her second marriage, which is more of a political contract, is not without its share of expectations and constraints. Anton is constantly putting on an act of the dignified, cerebral male who delights in the empty assertion of his ego. Martha is also expected to play her part properly—"all warm and feminine and coxing," a dutiful wife who should act as a tranquillizer for her sulking, depressed husband. But, by then, she is no mood to comply. Her strong dislike for all this fakery is expressed as: "Lord, how repulsive! how unpleasant the little jokes, the hundred dishonest little lies . . . which marriage demands" (LL,76).

Martha represents the women of the 40s, being written about in the 50s; for this reason the questioning of women's roles and her functions remain ambiguous. In fact, in her, Lessing captures the twentieth century woman in a transitional stage, yet undecided between romance and reason. As a new, evolving cultural entity, she is not yet sure of the standards she should set herself. In her need to work out a theory for explaining gender-contradictions, she comes to the vague conclusion that "women hate men who take them for granted" (PM,72). But this attempt at impersonality proves counterproductive because it reflects back her observe self—a self that seeks power through feminine wiles. This image of herself as "capricious" and "coy" female is loathsome, and she prefers to relegate it to "the past" (PM,72-73).
Lessing does not view the impulse to dominate as an exclusively male prerogative. A slight shift in focus reveals that Martha is repeatedly pulled into relationships under the force of her own idealism. Her suppressed female self seeks sublimation through politics, and in every male of her contact she looks for "the face of revolution" (*PM*, 314). In a moment of lucidity, Martha diagnoses it as an aspiration for surrogate power: "... she was doomed to be, not attracted to—she would not admit that yet—but with people who administered other people ..." (*PM*, 319). This is one of the reasons for her involvement with the group leader, Anton Hesse.\(^{41}\) Their relationship is a classic example of ideological structure intervening to spark off gender-tensions and cross-currents. Like romantic idealism, common ideological base is also rejected as a flimsy ground (in the absence of biorhythmic harmony) for a relationship to transcend power-pulls.

Unlike Toni Morrison, but like Nadine Gordimer and Margaret Atwood, Lessing presents men and women alike as victims of gender codes. It is not essential that the female will always emerge as victim and sufferer. Besides, it would not coincide with the reality principle, as Michèle Barret has expressed: "An analysis of gender ideology in which women are always innocent, always passive victims of patriarchal power is patently not satisfactory."\(^{42}\)

While analyzing gender-relations, Lessing introduces the element of role-reversal or the play of shifting identities in order to enliven their polarized positions and attitudes. It is quite clear during Douglas's pleadings and ridiculous threats that the centre of power lies elsewhere, i.e. with Martha. Anton Hesse's effeminate tantrums and subdued jealousy also do not, in anyway, show him in control. Lessing's episodic delineation of family life and Martha's amatory involvements expose both areas as the sites of role-reversals—an inversion of male-power and woman's oppression. Martha's mother, for instance, is far more domineering than her invalid father. Thomas Stern, in whom instinct, feeling, and ideas are so finely blended, also suffers from a sense of oppression in his marriage.
Women in his domestic sphere turn out to be more powerful; so much so that he feels utterly defeated and alienated while trying to establish contact with his little daughter, Esther, in *Landlocked*. The poignant scene is observed through Martha:

Esther looked doubtfully at the big, brown arm held out to her, at the pleading hand at the end of it—and then slowly, she backed away. She was not coquetting, she simply backed herself away, and her face frowned . . . . And in her movement, the way she ran off, was a wild relief, as if she had been released from an oppression. She was running away from what was too heavy. Her father was a weight on her (*La*, 204).

The narrative voice leaves nothing to doubt. It is a rejection—of the male, of the paternal authority and of the patriarchal value-system. It is a rejection that men in the future will have to get accustomed to. In this Lessing shares with some others of her kind "a politics which enjoins a refusal to assume that women are simply victims of injustice and men the perpetrators".

Twentieth century women writers have increasingly looked upon the relationship between the sexes as primarily a matter of power politics. Fay Weldon, Margaret Drabble, Angela Carter, Atwood etc. are never in any doubt of it. Lessing, however, is impatient with a feminism which begins and ends with any analysis of the oppression of women. She takes a broader view: for her sexual relations are an intractable part of human experience. Besides being peculiarly constant areas of antagonism and estrangement, they reflect upon the nature of power-structure in the society.

**Micro-power Structures**

Lessing concerns herself with the problems of power not just in a narrow familial sense; the very dynamics of micro-power structure forms an essential component of her *Children of Violence*. It is that complex network of power relationships which has its place in the deeper layers of consciousness, but which decides the temper of a society—its cultural and moral advancement or stagnation. There are subtleties at work in terms of
language as well as ideas, rendering it difficult to formulate any simplistic notion of sexual politics and its treatment in women novelists in general and Lessing in particular. Allan Massie's comment is quite revealing in this context: "The feminist novel is a political act of seriousness which goes beyond the mild arrangements of social relations." The gravity of Lessing's art cannot but include the devious and intangible habits of mind which exercise power at the level of "gesture." As such, the power relations in *Children of Violence* elucidate that power is not unitary and its exercise binary. Power in that sense does not exist: what exists is an infinitely complex network of micro-powers, of power relations that permeate every aspect of social life.

The range of masculine power is as much horizontal as it is vertical. The theme of male gaze and the dominance which it exerts in the construction of the female body-image is touched upon prominently in *Martha Quest* and *Landlocked*, though leading to different conclusions. Generally, male-authored texts tend to construct female characters as "passive objects of a masculine gaze, which is frequently voyeuristic and almost invariably judgmental." Lessing, in contrast, celebrates the beauty of the female body without shame or apology, articulating the pleasures that it involves. However, the dangers that lie in this subtle manipulation of the female mind are not altogether ignored.

The male gaze can monitor the female responses in absentia, and the female may also unknowingly allow herself to be controlled, impelled by the desire for physical appeal and appreciation. We find Martha submitting to this domination in her preparations for her debut-making dance: "she was not herself, she was obedient to that force" which was represented in her partner's "form and features" (*PM*,103). Lessing skillfully exposes the contradictory aspects of women's position as the object of male gaze. Unlike some other writers, she pays particular attention to the pleasures it involves. Martha responds obediently to Donovan's attempts to beautify her; it pleases her but she can't help "shuddering with dislike for him."
(MQ.199). Her female self relishes being centre of male approval; mixed with it is the anticipated admiration of others (MQ.198-204). But her non-conforming, restless self soon rebels against the manipulations of a chauvinistic male, and breaks away from this constricting circle of domination by befriending Adolph King, a non-entity as far as the Club circle was concerned (MQ.232). The dynamics of male observation, its role in maintaining the level of a women's self-esteem, has been extensively explored in The Summer before the Dark, where Kate comes to the startling realization that her posture and appearance alone decide her visibility. Persistently present in the young Martha also is a "half-repressed resentment" of the way she is shown off (MQ.221; PM.33-34).

One of the more complex analyses of the theme of dominance at this plane occurs in Landlocked (122-24). In Martha-Thomas relationship, Lessing inverts the whole issue of domination. She presents women's sexual and social pleasures as constructed around the process of objectification:

He looked, smiling, at the naked woman lying face downwards, who then, because his gaze at her was apparently unbearable, turned over her back . . . while her mind thought: look at that, how very extraordinary! For now that her body has become a newly discovered country with laws of its own, she studied it with passionate curiosity (LL.123).

Here, the territorial image of domination and authority is self-evident; equally obvious is the willing submission. These two polarities, through an intricate process of mutual cancelling out, give way to a psychic release: "Some force, some power, had taken hold of them both, and had made such changes in her . . ." (LL.268). Martha's self—"soul? . . . psyche? being?"—acquires meaning through Thomas' perusal. It not only subscribes to pleasure principle but involves a kind of freedom, a liberation.

In Martha-Adolph liaison, another diaphanous aspect of sexual politics—the nature of seduction—is dissected and acknowledged. Courtship is a rare, isolated event, but seduction is rampantly practised in male-female relationships in society, and so in fiction. Lessing in first few
volumes (*MQ, PM*) devises a way to describe not physical seduction as such but the very nature of seduction, situating it where it takes place—in the mind. Without separating it from social or material consequences, Lessing situates the act within the rarefied sphere of cunning and compliance.

Having dodged various attempts of some Sports Club "boys" to seduce her, Martha submits herself to Adolph out of sheer defiance against the group’s control and as a gesture to reassert her individuality. Adolph is the cunning, experienced seducer who worms his way into Martha’s heart, and later body, through emotional exploitation, invoking her anti-racial feelings by acting as an under-dog. On her part, so strong and urgent had became the need to experience and experiment with her erotic self that she unwittingly joins the game and allows herself to be manoeuvred: "Then she knew he was watching her, and instinctively intensified the dreamy absorption of her face for his admiration" (*MQ*, 47).

Though not as clear about the things as Anna is in *The Golden Notebook*, Martha’s situation is still far better than, say, Tess or Lydia Bennet. The narrative voice informs: "She was, however, different from the young girl in earlier generation, in that she knew that everything was allowable" (*MQ*, 241). Cunning, thus, works at the level of both—the seducer and the seduced. After the culmination of seduction, the relationship settles down to a sickening power-game meant to pressurise and intimidate the female. In him is revealed the bullying, possessive, brutal male (*MQ*, 251) who makes the female a victim of his complexes, racial insecurity, and his parasitical possessiveness. The hidden depths of male-neurosis reappear in Jack’s egoistic relationships in *The Four-Gated City*.

In Martha, Lessing attempts the difficult task of bringing body and mind in concord. It is a well-known fact that phallocratic culture defines women by reference to the body. Hélène Cixous views it as the conspiracy of logocentricism to "subject thought—all the concepts, the codes, the values—to a two-terms system." The oppressive consequences of this division—heart, sensitivity, nature, pathos for woman; while head, intelligibility,
culture and logos for man—are reflected in Martha-Douglas relationship. Douglas Knowell is very much the product of that imperialist/capitalist thought where man is identified with culture and mind. Martha's interest in politics is an aberration because it is an intrusion upon the male domain, i.e. thought and intellect. A consequence of this identification is the barrier it imposes on Martha's aspirations, a barrier that she can knock down only by cutting through a gossamer web of micro-power structures.

As an abstraction, intelligence is power; and for a long time it has been denied to women for the very obvious reason: it poses a threat to patriarchal domination. Martha, as the precursor of Anna and the successor of Lawrence's Urusula, is more precariously placed. She represents the new woman on the threshold of liberation, whom not her femininity but her intelligence makes more vulnerable in her emotional and physical relationships. For instance, as a vibrant adolescent she cannot muster self-dissolving passion to match the ardent advances of her beau (here Perry); and Lessing explains:

> Her mind was schooled in poetic descriptions of the love act from literature, and in scientific descriptions from manuals on sex; it was not prepared for the self-absorbed rite which he was following (MQ, 225).

Her physical preparations "to be lost" are stalled by a mind that remains alert and observant, and thus her innermost being is never touched except when with Thomas. This realisation is vividly there even when tackling her emotions with regard to her mother:

> She was engaged in examining and repairing those intellectual bastions of defence behind which she sheltered ... it was as if she, Martha, was a variety of soft, shell-less creature whose survival lay in the strength of those walls (PM, 109).

In Anna's case, her intelligence proves threatening in her relations with men; Martha, too, is made aware of the awkwardness a woman's intelligence can create in male-defined culture. Her effort to discuss a book in the Sports Club gets the derisive response: "'This baby's got brains'. And he laughed and rolled up his eyes" (MQ, 205). The female who is the
“nature” and “body” must suffer from guilt for the sake of her intelligence. In a memorable episode in *A Ripple from the Storm*, Mrs. Van suffers sexual rejection because of the book—Ingersoll—lying beside her pillow (*RFS*,209). Lynn Sukenick has explained this situation as “the betrayal of the intelligent woman by the man who refuses to honour her claims to thinking.” In Martha’s case, it is only when she dismisses herself intellectually that her femininity gets accentuated and she displays all those traditional feminine traits for which she repudiates herself afterwards.

All these factors combine to impart greater dimension to the narrative. In critical terminology, Lessing challenges what Cixous has called “this solidarity of logocentricism and phallocentricism” by imparting intelligence and reason to Martha and by giving her potential space to evolve as a character. In all her relationships, she is guided more by intelligence and less by feelings: Douglas and Anton are the fallen icons who initially appeal to the ideas that she cherishes. Her analytic mind—“that dispassionate cool eye” (*MQ*,224)—is all the time at work assessing and evaluating her own progress.

The bases of her existence are ideas, and the existential despair that she is made to experience very early on in the sequence is “the form of moral exhaustion which is caused by seeing a great many facts without knowing the cause for them . . .” (*MQ*, 224). It is to reason them out that she goes through various social-political experiences. The “part of herself she acknowledged to be true” (*MQ*,204) is always pushing forth to rip apart the facades of her various incarnations through different stages of the narrative. It is only with a desire to “recover a sense of herself as a person she might, if only potentially, respect” (*PM*,32) that Martha moves through the middle three volumes—an ideal which she is finally closest to achieving in *The Four-Gated City*.

Because of these conflicting traits—body and mind—Martha imbibes in herself the question of whether the ideal human being will be
androgynous, combining masculine and feminine personalities. Her aggression is a traditionally male trait, and in the first book she emerges as something of a rebel—revolting against her mother's domination and her family's delimitations. Gentle feminine traits are visible only in her rare moments of heightened perception of her surroundings and natural world.\footnote{56}

Martha’s unsparing self-analysis, her lack of emotionism and her habit of theorising are more of masculine characteristics. Lessing voices her serious objection to the attitudes of mind they (male writers) took for granted" \cite{pm,73}. It seems, like Woolf, Lessing too has seen the danger of being “a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.\footnote{57} The androgynous qualities make Martha’s mind more "resonant and porous", to use Woolf's words, so that it becomes a viable medium to transmit experience. When viewed through the ending of \textit{The Four-Gated City}, it might point to a new creature that should evolve as a re-creation of human traits in all individuals.

Not only Martha but Mrs. Van is also projected as an embodiment of physical and mental solidity for which men are generally admired. It is interesting to note that Mary Turner (GS) experiences thrill and satisfaction when performing masculine role—that is, while displaying authority and power at the farm during Dick's illness. This too emphasizes the harmony and balance that human beings achieve in their androgynous selves. Perhaps Lessing means this when she asserts time and again that things would be much easier if a certain balance is achieved in gendered attitudes, and if it is realised that “we're not all that different where it matters, like in our inner selves”\footnote{58} It is not by chance that a character is made to state in the first novel of the sequence: “I really do feel that this sex is overrated, don’t you? \cite{mq,173}. The sentence points to a vital signification of the text: not a separation of the binary oppositions but an acceptance of their amalgamation can alone smoothen the relationships leading to a healthy, symbiotic existence.
From the angle of sexual politics, *Children of Violence* attempts to validate the experience of women: Lessing has used Martha's experience to reassert women's self-esteem and lend authority to their political and personal dimensions. The novel-sequence just strikes the note of change that was slowly but surely beginning to be heard: women did not any longer want to live solely in relation to men and children. Martha is one of them, searching for her own voice, and seeking to define a different concept of identity and meaning in her life.

This naturally involves a challenge to established relations of sexual power and subordination. Embedded in the text is an analytical exploration of gender situation and the cultural constructs which produce these structural differences. The sequence elucidates that the characteristics of men are not essentially the norm, nor those of women necessarily subsidiary. Hence, it seeks to alter the standard of measurement reserved for gender categories. In delineating gender politics, Lessing highlights the ambiguities and absences that define the ground of cultural struggle. This theme is related to the "quest-motif" so often emphasised in relation to the series. The ultimate purpose is to understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, so as to arrive at a new way of knowing ourselves and our world, to redefine meanings and values.

The text does inspire a gender-aware reading, but as we move on to *The Four-Gated City*, sexuality and gender begin to fade into a transcendent condition as the thrust of the narrative changes course. The quest in the fifth volume is for a higher androgynous knowledge. The emphasis shifts to the confrontations of conscience and culture in the period following the Second World War. Lessing's concerns are self-evident when she says that "this whole trouble between men and women is a symptom of something very much bigger . . . . Something else has to be put right."

In London, Martha is a more mellow "incarnation" of her earlier self; this barely serves to enhance some of her dilemmas. Rejecting traditional roles and deliberately departing from a socially approved stereotype does
sometimes lead to a split vision. Herself a witness as well as a participant in the cultural psychosis, she is caught up in the vicious circle of guilt, alienation and despair. This web of despair that seems to have become the fate of modern man comes to hold the subject position in the richly woven texture of *The Four-Gated City*. 
Notes


9. For the manifest reflection of this "shift," see J. Miller 5. Elaine Showalter has graded this same gradual shift as "Feminine, Feminist and Female"; qtd. in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985) 56.


15. Miller 5.


18. The question of a women's right to decide about her pregnancy—the question that was to become the central issue of every feminist debate—is viewed by Lessing in terms of a women's right to decide about her body (PM.25).

19. Lessing achieves it through grotesquely parodic representation or through unsparing touch of realism.

20. Nancy Hartsock, qtd. in Paulina Palmer 77. This theme has been treated at length by certain white women writers such as Nadine Gordimer and Dorothy Bryant. A remarkable illustration, however, is to be found in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*.

21. Some of the factors are hinted at in the opening part of this chapter whereas certain others have been discussed in the second and third chapters.

22. Critics often tend to see too much meaning in this influence. See Martin Green's (179-83). His analysis tends to show Lessing's eroticism as heavily indebted to Lawrence.

23. Lessing, interview with Florence Howe 426.


26. In order to corroborate her point, J. Miller quotes Lessing: “Marxism looks at things as a whole and in relation to each other . . . I think it is possible that Marxism was the first attempt, for our times . . . at a world mind, world ethic” (*GN* 14-15).


29. Lessing combines different polarities in Martha: she is conquered and contented by the sexual purity of Thomas, while she is dragged into constant struggle of egos with Anton.

30. In this, Lessing is quite unlike Lawrence who forbids women to have an independent sensuality. For him, women is made to give not to take.


32. Hester Eisenstein, qtd. in Palmer 43.


35. “The whole thing was a gigantic social deception,” analyses Martha (*PM*, 45).

36. This is one of the fundamental reasons that the relationship with Anton does not cement and develop into an emotional communion.
37. Lessing's total distrust of marriage as an institution is voiced in Martha's critical assessment:

How strange it was—marriage and love; one would think, the way newspapers, films, literature, the people who are supposed to express us talk, that we believe marriage, love, to be desperate, important, deep experiences they say they are. But of course they don't believe any such thing. Hardly anyone believes it (LL, 193).


41. Olive Schreiner’s comment as one of the introductory quotations supplies the essence of Martha’s responsiveness to Anton: “My friendship for him begun by my being struck by the stand he took on certain political questions” (RFS, 65).

42. Michèl Barret, qtd. in Toril Moi 157.

43. In Thomas’s wife, Rachel, appears the woman’s “double and deceptive visage”: she is all that a man desires and all that he does not attain. Thomas says: “It’s just that there is something like seventy percent of you she leaves out of account.(LL,208).

44. Miller 214.


46. Alan Sheridan, Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth (London: Tavistock, 1980) 139.


48. Lessing has dwelt on this dimension in detail while talking to Josephine Handin. See “The Capacity to look at a Situation Coolly,” Ingersoll 54-55.
49. See Anthea Zeman for the mechanics of seduction as a subject for study in modern woman's novel 165.

50. When Adolph fails to come up to her expectations, she takes refuge in another strategy: her mind swallows "the moment of disappointment whole, like a python, so that he, the man and the mirage were able once again to fuse together in the future" (MQ, 249).

51. Cixous, Lodge 287.

52. Sukenick 525.

53. Sukenick 526.

54. This aspect reveals itself in her verbal exchange with Joss Cohen (MQ 61-63). It is also apparent during her affair with Adolph and in the blossoming stage of the relationship with Douglas (MQ, 299-308).

55. Cixous, Lodge 289.

56. i. Her peculiar experience, the moment of "illumination" (MQ, 74-75).

   ii. With Thomas (LL, 121-30).

   iii. Her experience in the rain—woman as nature and body—her pregnancy, and her new motherhood (PM, 162-75).


58. Doris Lessing, "Writing as Time Runs Out," Ingersoll 90.