Chapter -2

Remorse and Self-Loathing Heroines

“Remorse” and “Self-loathing” are the terms used to articulate an emotional expression like personal regret along with extreme dislike or hatred towards a family and a social class. Particularly, the difficult relationship of the childhood and of the young adulthood with parents plays a key role in defining the causes and course of this emotional expression. Related to the same, the research here deals with the childhood and adolescent period of female protagonists principally Lessing’s heroines both with their parents and with their society which pave way for their distress in their entire life.

The childhood of these protagonists shape the development of their characters, which is the essence of their dilemmas in their future lives. They all encountered unfortunate incidents in their past lives, which were unconsciously repressed. The unawareness of their plight, which lies in their subconscious, has resulted in both physical and psychological pain. Another similar aspect among these three novels is the reaction of the protagonists towards their past experiences. They prefer to forget these moments since they feel hurt and cannot bear the burden of their past worries. The characters seem to forget those past incidents however, they are not aware of the fact that the memories are just in the depths of their mind and these are revealed once the protagonists feel weak enough to yield to their subconscious.

Lessing has commented that unhappy childhood days seem to produce fiction writers out of unavoidable experiences they gained and it is considered to be true that even Lessing’s childhood days were uneven mix of some pleasure and much pain. Her mother obsessed with raising a proper daughter, enforced a rigid system of rules and hygiene at
home, and then installed Lessing in a convent school, where nuns terrified their charges with stories of hell and damnation. Lessing was later sent to girls’ high school in the capital of Salisbury, from which she soon dropped out. She was thirteen and it was the end of her formal education. But like other women writers such as Olive Schreiner and Nadine Gordimer, from Southern Africa, Lessing has made herself into a self-educated intellectual.

Lessing’s early reading and bed time stories by her mother also nurtured her youth and she herself kept her younger brother awake, spinning out tales. Her early years were also spent absorbing her father’s bitter memories of World War I. She spent most of her childhood alone in a landscape with very few human beings in it. Her latest book, Alfred and Emily recounts her childhood on a farm in Southern Rhodesia and examines the profound effects of World War I on her father, a former soldier and amputee and her mother, a nurse whose true love drowns in the English Channel. On the eve of the book’s publication in U.K., Lessing spoke with Time’s William Lee Adams at her home in London, on Friday July 11, 2008 as,

My father and my mother, I now see, were very done in by World War I. My father was always so mingled with rage at his life. He got severe diabetes and a whole lot of other ills come with that. He became an invalid and passive, which was not his nature at all. It took me a very long time to see that I’d never really known him. (www.dorislessing.org/biography)

Lessing’s fiction is deeply autobiographical and much of it emerges out of her experiences in Africa. Drawing upon her childhood memories, she has written about the struggles among opposing elements and individual’s personality. She has also portrayed the conflict between the individual conscience and the collective good through her heroines
namely Mary in *The Grass is Singing*, Anna in *The Golden Notebook* and Martha in *Children of Violence* realistically. The heroines who populate the work of Lessing are social critics rebelling against the cultural restrictions of their societies. These highly individualistic characters like Lessing, strives for ruthless honesty as they aim to free themselves from the chaos, emotional numbness and hypocrisy afflicting their generation. The heroines’ childhood and their young adulthood and in particular their difficult relationship with their parents and their life as a family, play a key role in defining the causes and course of their breakdown through out the novels of Lessing.

In *The Grass is Singing*, especially, Mary was in many ways an immature, emotionally malnourished and became at times even a pathetic figure because of her relationship with her parents i.e. her drunken, absent minded, always at work father and her bitter, resentful, hard-spirited mother. Sometimes her mother worked herself into a passion of resentment and walked up to the barman complaining that she could not make ends, while her husband squanders his salary in drink. Mary knew even as a child, her mother complained for the sake of making a scene and parading her sorrows, that she really enjoyed the luxury of standing there in front of the bar while the casual drinkers looked on sympathetically. Thus her mother enjoyed complaining in a hard sorrowful voice about her husband. Lessing describes this incident as,

> Every night he comes home from here, every night! And I am expected to bring up three children on the money that is left over when he chooses to come home… But what can I do? I can’t refuse to sell him drink, now can I? (GS, 33)
And then she would stand still waiting for the condolences of the man who pocketed the money which was rightly hers to spend for the children. At last having played out her scene and taken the fill of sympathy, she would walk away to her house, holding Mary by the hand. She used to cry over her sewing while Mary comforted her miserably, longing to get away, but feeling important too, and hating her father.

This was not to say that Mary’s father drank himself into a state of brutality. He was seldom drunk as men are, whom Mary outside the bar, frightening her into a real terror of the place. He drank himself into a state of cheerful fuddled good humour, coming home late to a cold dinner, which he ate by himself and his wife reserved her scornful ridicule of him when her friends came to tea. It was as if she did not wish to give her husband the satisfaction of knowing that she cared anything for him at all or felt anything for him, even contempt and derision. She behaved as if he was simply not there for her.

Mary’s father was a little man with a dull ruffled hair and a baked-apple face. He brought home the money and not enough of that and so he was a cipher in the house. He called visiting petty officials “sir” and shouted at the natives under him. He was on the railway, working as a pump man. And then, as well as being the focus of the district and the source of her father’s drunkenness, the store was the powerful implacable place that sent in bills at the end of the month. They could never be fully paid and her mother was appealing to the owner for just another month’s grace. This made her father and mother fought over these bills twelve times a year. They never quarreled over anything but money; sometimes, in fact, her mother remarked dryly that she might have done worse and she might, for instance, be like Mrs. Newman, who had seven children but she had only three mouths to fill. It was a long time before Mary saw the connection between these phrases and by then
there was only one mouth to feed, her own; for her brother and sister both died of dysentery
one very dusty year.

Mary’s parents became good friends because of this sorrow for a short while. She
could remember thinking that it was an ill wind that did no one good because the two dead
children were both so much older than she that they were no good to her as playmates and
the loss was more than compensated by the happiness of living in a house where there
suddenly no quarrels with a mother who wept but who had lost that terrible hard
indifference. That phase did not last long however which made Mary to look back on it as
the happiest time of her childhood.

The family moved three times before Mary went to school but afterwards she could
not distinguish between the various stations she had lived in. She remembered an exposed
dust village that backed by a file of bunchy gum trees with a square of dust always swirling
and settling several times a day with the screaming and coughing of trains. Then she was
sent to boarding and her life changed. She felt happy for the first time in her life and she
covered a veil over all those miseries of her childhood. She herself said as,

She was extremely happy, so happy that she dreaded going home at
holiday-times to her fuddled father, her bitter mother and the fly-away little
house that was like a small wooden box on stilts. (GS, 34-35)

Besides, Mary had always been afraid of being like her mother, who reminded her
of the suffering woman figure under the suppression of male authority. In her first dream, she
saw herself as a child in playing in the “dusty” garden, which symbolized her parents’
poverty. There she was the leader in a group of children who were faceless. Then she heard
her mother’s calling and she had to leave the game to go back home. This indicates that
even in her dream Mary’s wish was unfulfilled through her mother, who symbolized the traditional woman type. Going inside, she stopped at the bedroom door “sickened”, where there was her father whom she had hated all her life. He held her mother in his arms giving the signs of a sexual affair; thus, Mary felt disturbed and she ran away.

In her second dream, Mary saw herself playing with her parent’s brother and sister. It was a kind of “hide-and-seek” play in which it was her turn to cover her eyes, and her mother hid herself. It was only Mary who took the play seriously and this caused her to be mocked by the others including her father. Then, her father held her head in his lap laughing and mocking. She smelt the sickly odour of beer and through it she smelt too when her head held down in the thick stuff of his father’s trousers the unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him, and she tried to escape since she felt half-suffocated, but her father forced her while mocking at her.

This nightmare was followed immediately by another where she united her father with Moses towards the end of the dream as, Moses approached slowly, obscene and powerful, and it was not only he, but her father who was threatening her. They advanced together, and she could smell, not the native smell but the unwashed smell of her room which was musty, like animals while he came near and put his hand on her arm. Thus dreams play a very essential role in demonstrating the realities about the protagonist, Mary. It is only in dreams where Mary can fully unite the past with the present, which supplies significant clues for the reader to analyze the suppressed feelings and experiences of Mary. However, these dreams do not openly reveal her past experiences but they seem to be absurd and meaningless, yet they have deep in her normal life, yet the deeper she sinks into depression, the more latent thoughts explode in her dreams.
At sixteen Mary left the school and took a job in an office in town and again she became happy. She seemed that she was born for typing and shorthand and book-keeping and the comfortable routine of an office. She liked things to happen safely one after another in a pattern and living in a girls’ club, going out with men without indulging into any sexual relationships. Thus, Mary became a woman who seemed to have fitted in the society since she did not have any interests and desires of her own. She had almost an automatic life like most modern people in society and Lessing describes this as,

She got up late, in time for office (she was very punctual), but not in time for breakfast. She worked efficiently, but in a leisurely way, until lunch. She went back to the club for lunch. Two more hours’ work in the afternoon and she was free. Then she played tennis or hockey or swam...

(GS, 37)

Then Mary’s mother died and she was virtually alone in the world, and her father was five hundred miles away having been transferred to yet another station she hardly saw him and he was proud of her but left her alone. She retorted about her father that, “He’s a man, isn’t he? He can do as he likes.” (GS, 35). Being alone in the world had no terrors for her at all but she liked it. And by dropping her father she seemed in some way to be avenging her mother’s sufferings. It had never occurred to, that her father too may have suffered. She had inherited from her mother an arid feminism, which had no meaning in her own life at all, for she was leading the comfortable carefree existence of a single woman in the South Africa and she did not know how fortunate she was. She understood nothing of conditions in other countries, had no measuring rod to access herself with.
When Mary apprenticed as a typist in a nearby town, she preferred to live in a girls’ club to seek shelter from the problems of identity. Within that community, she created for herself an “impersonal”, world to protect her from facing the inner self with all its repressed aspects. Her steps regarding her protection is expressed by Lessing like,

She [Mary] went on as companionable, as adaptable, as aloof and as heart-whole as ever, working as hard enjoying herself as she ever did in the office, and never for one moment alone, except when she was asleep.

(GS, 38)

Till Mary was twenty-five nothing had happened to break the smooth and comfortable life she led. Then her father died. That removed the last link that bound her to a childhood which she hated to remember. There was nothing left to connect her with the sordid little house on slits, the screaming of trains, the dust, and the strife between her parents. And when the funeral was over, she had returned to the office, she looked forward to a life that would continue as it had so far been. She was very happy that was perhaps her only positive quality, for there was nothing else distinctive about her, though at twenty-five she was at her prettiest. Sheer contentment put a bloom on her and she became a thin girl, who moved with a fashionable curtain of light-brown hair, serious blue eyes, and pretty clothes. Her friends would have described her as a slim blonde and she modeled herself on the more childish-looking film stars. In the communal life of the boarding house, she indulged in outer activity at the expense of her inner self. Lacking an operational sense of self, she led a marginal existence colored by a sense of outer activity and inner passivity. Lessing talks about this incident as,
She led a full and active life. Yet it was a passive one ...' for it depended on the other people entirely. She was not the kind of woman who initiates parties, or who is the centre of a crowd. She was still the girl who is 'taken out'. (GS, 37)

At thirty nothing had changed. On her thirtieth birthday, Mary felt a vague surprise that did not even amount to discomfort for she did not feel any different—that the years had gone past so quickly. The age thirty sounded as a great age for others, but it had nothing to do with her. At the same time she did not celebrate this birthday and she allowed it to be forgotten. She felt almost outraged that such a thing could happen to her, who was no different from Mary of sixteen. She was by now the personal secretary of her employer, and was earning good money. If she had wanted, she could have taken a flat and lived the smart sort of life. She was quite presentable. She had the undistinguished, dead-level appearance of South African white democracy. Her voice was one of thousands: flattened, a little sing-song, clipped. Anyone could have worn her clothes. There was nothing to prevent her living by herself, even running her own car, entertaining on a small scale. She could have become a person on her own account. But this was against her instinct.

Mary chose to live in a girl’s club, which had been started, really to help women who could not earn much money, but she had been there so long as no one thought of asking her to leave. She chose it because it reminded her of school, and she had hated leaving school. She liked the crowds of girls, eating in a big dining-room, and coming home after the pictures to find a friend in her room waiting for a little gossip. In the club she was a person of some importance, out of the usual run. But one thing she forgot that she was so much older than the others. She had come to have what was almost the role of a comfortable
maiden aunt to whom one could tell one’s troubles. But Mary was never shocked, never condemned, never told tales. She seemed impersonal, about the little worries. The stiffness of her manner, her shyness, protected her from many spites and jealousies. She seemed immune. This was her strength, but also a weakness that she would not have considered as a weakness. She felt disinclined, almost repelled, by the thought of intimacies and scenes and contacts. She moved among all those young women with a faint aloofness that said as clear as: “I will not be drawn in. And I was quite unconscious of it. I was very happy in the club.” (GS, 37)

She led an active life in the girls’ club and in the office, where she had considered as an important person with good practice, because she had worked there for many years. And in the evening she went to sundowner parties where she liked to dance till midnight. Sometimes she went to the pictures five nights a week. Hence she was never in bed before twelve or later. And so it had gone on, day after day, week after week, year after year. The state of emptiness and fear experiences made Mary unable to reconcile her inner self and also unable to achieve a healthy or vital self in dealing with the world.

This state in which an individual escaped from facing the inner self by seeking solutions through involvement with the collective was doomed to failure, since it was soon threatened by the sense of “ontological insecurity”. This individual in such a state developed mechanisms in response to become not what he/she really was but what his/her community wanted her to be. That was precisely the case in this early novel where Mary, kept adapting herself sensibly and quietly to any occasion. She maintained that superficially contended existence for ten years in which she retained the outward appearance “Mary of sixteen”, a further indication of her psychological dislocation. This pseudo-balanced existence,
however, did not last, since it was not solidly anchored by knowledge of the self and also it 
soon collapsed before the first blow.

Mary seemed not to care for men. She would say to her girls, that men would get 
all the fun. Yet outside the office and the club her life was entirely dependent upon men, 
though she would have most indignantly repudiated the accusation. And perhaps she was not 
so dependent upon them really, for when she listened to other people’s complaints and 
miseries she offered none of her own. Sometimes her friends felt a little put off and let 
down. It was hardly fair, they felt obscurely, to listen, to advise, to act as a sort of universal 
shoulder for the world to weep on, and give back nothing of her own. The truth was that she 
had no troubles. She heard other people’s complicated stories with wonder, even with a little 
fear. She shrank away from all that and she was almost a rare phenomenon i.e. a woman of 
thirty without love, troubles, headaches, backaches, sleeplessness or neurosis.

Thus, South Africa was considered to be a wonderful place for the unmarried white 
woman. After some years her friends got married and she had been bridesmaid a dozen 
times and other people’s children were growing up, but she went on in her work with out the 
awareness of her inner self. Lessing points out the mannerism of Mary in the novel as,

If she had been left alone she would have gone on, in her own way, 
enjoying herself thoroughly, until people found one day that turned 
imperceptibly into one of those women who have become old without ever 
having been middle-aged: a little withered, a little acid, hard as nails, 
sentimentally kindhearted, and addicted to religion or small dogs. (GS, 39)

Moreover if a visiting cricket team needed partners when they came to town, the 
organizers would ring up to Mary. That was the kind of thing she was good at. Hence she
adapted herself sensibly and quietly to any occasion. She would sell tickets for a charity dance or act as a dancing partner for a visiting full-back with equal amiability. And she used to dress her hair like a little-girl and wore little-girl frocks in pastel colors, and kept her shy, naive manner. When Mary thought of “home” she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains and when she thought of marriage she remembered her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled and when she thought of children she saw her mother’s face at her children’s funeral – anguished, but as dry and as hard as rock. Mary liked other people’s children but shuddered at the thought of having any of her own. She felt sentimental at weddings, but she had a profound distaste for sex. And there had been little privacy in her home and there were things she did not care to remember and also she had taken good care to forget them years ago.

Mary certainly felt at times restless, and a vague dissatisfaction took the pleasure out of her activities for a while. She would be going to bed, for instance, contentedly, after the pictures, when the thought would strike her, another day had gone. And then time would contract and it seemed to her only a breathing space since she left school and came into town to earn her own living; and she would feel a little panicky, as if an invisible support had been drawn away from underneath her. But then, being a sensible person, and firmly convinced that thinking about oneself was morbid, she would get into bed and turn out the lights. She might wonder, before drifting off to sleep.

But by morning Mary would forget it, and the day went round, and she would be happy again as she did not know what she wanted. Something bigger, she would think vaguely – a different kind of life. But the mood never lasted long. She was so satisfied with her work, where she felt sufficient and capable with her friends, whom she relied on, and
with her life at the club, which was as pleasant and as gregarious as being in a giant twittering aviary, where there was always the excitement of other people’s engagements and weddings and with her men friends, who treated her just like a good pal, with none of this silly sex business.

But all women became conscious sooner or later of that impalpable but steel-strong pressure to get married and Mary was not at all susceptible to atmosphere. She was in the house of a married friend, sitting on the verandah with a lighted room behind her. She was alone and she heard people talking in low voices by using her name. She thought of rising and going inside to declare herself but she sank down and waited for a suitable moment to pretend that she had just come in from the garden. Her face burned and her hands went clammy, when she listened to the conversation. Lessing describes her state as:

She’s not fifteen any longer: it is ridiculous!

Someone should tell her about her clothes.

How old is she?

Must be well over thirty. She has been going strong for years. She was working long before I began working and that was a good twelve years ago.

Why doesn’t she marry? She must have had plenty of chances.

I don’t think so. My husband was keen on her himself once, but he thinks she will never marry. She just isn’t like that isn’t like that at all. Something missing somewhere.

Oh, I don’t know.
She’s gone off so much, in any case. The other day caught sight of her in the street and hardly recognized her. It’s a fact! The way she plays all those games, her skin is like sandpaper, and she’s got so thin.

But she’s such a nice girl.

She’ll never set the rivers on fire, though.

She’d make someone a good wife. She’s a good sort, Mary.

She should marry someone years older than herself. A man of fifty would suit her… you’ll see, she will marry someone old enough to be her father one of these days. (GS, 40-41)

It sounded cruelly malicious to Mary and she was stunnéd and outraged. She was so naïve, so unconscious of herself in relation to other people that it had never entered her head that people could discuss her behind her back. She sat there writhing and twisting her hands. Then she composed herself and went back into the room to join her treacherous friends who greeted her as cordially as if they had not just that moment driven knives into her heart and thrown her quite off balance. She could not recognize herself in the picture they had made of her. That little incident apparently became important which made a profound effect on Mary. She, who had never time to think of herself, started to sit in her room for hours at a time, wondering like, why did they say those things, and what was the matter with her? She also had a doubt their intention when they said that she was not like that.

Mary was even more disturbed and felt unhappy because they seemed just as usual, treating her with their ordinary friendliness. She began to suspect double meanings where none were intended to find maliciousness in the glance of a person who felt nothing but
affection for her. Turning over in her mind the words she had by accident listened to, she thought of ways to improve herself. She took the ribbon out of her hair with regret as she thought she looked very pretty with a mass of curls round her rather long thin face. She bought herself tailor-made clothes, in which she felt ill at ease because she felt truly herself in pinafore frocks and childish skirts.

When Mary overheard others discussing her age and her failure to marry, she was shocked to find her social self, which was indeed the only self she was aware of disapproved of by the standards of the group with which she had so far identified herself. Thus, Mary suddenly discovered not playing her part, for she did not get married. As she was completely dependent on the social existence, it collapsed her whole being and the narrator in the novel The Grass is Singing significantly explains that Mary’s idea of herself was destroyed and she was not fitted to recreate herself. She could not exist without that impersonal casual friendship from other people.

Mary therefore quickly attempted to find another means to amend her image in the eyes of her society. Her compulsion to be considered normal by society’s standard drove her to plunge into marriage. For the first time in Mary’s life, she was feeling uncomfortable with men. A small core of contempt for them of which she was quite unconscious and which had protected her from sex as surely as if she had been truly hideous, had melted and she had lost her poise. And she began to look around for someone to marry.

And the first man Mary allowed to approach her was a widower of fifty-five with half-grown children. It was because she felt safer with him because she did not associate arduous and embrace with a middle-aged gentleman whose attitude towards her was almost fatherly. He knew perfectly well what he wanted i.e. was a pleasant companion, a mother for
his children and someone to run his house for him. He found Mary as a good company and she was kind to his children. Nothing really could have been more suitable: since apparently she had to get married and this was the kind of marriage to suit her best. But things went wrong. He underestimated her experience and it seemed to him that a woman who had been on her own so long should know her own mind and understand what he was offering her. A relationship developed which was clear to both of them, until he proposed to her, was accepted and began to make love to her. Then a violent revulsion overcame her and she ran away; when he began to kiss her in his comfortable drawing room and all the way home through the streets of the club. There she fell in the bed and wept. However in the next morning she felt disgusted at her behavior and apologized to him, but that was the end of it.

And now Mary was left at sea, not knowing what was she needed. It seemed to her that she had to run from him because she started considered him as an old man in her mind. She shuddered and avoided men over thirty. She was over that age herself, but everything she thought of herself was that she was like a girl still. But all the time, unconsciously, without admitting it to herself, she was looking for a husband for the sake of the society.

Thus Mary in The Grass is Singing was obsessed with her poverty-stricken past and she had a great fear of becoming like her mother, who was destined to live in poverty with her alcoholic husband until her death. Mary had suppressed her poignant memories as they caused her pain. Yet her controlled thoughts exploded when she entered into a weaker psychological state. Her only aim was to lead a life completely opposite to the life of her mother, which, ironically, could not be achieved by the protagonist. Besides, Moses, the slave, evoked some memories for Mary about her father and infant sexuality, which might suggest an incestuous relationship that Mary had repressed. Furthermore, Mary could not
forget her friends’ gossips about her asexuality and childish behavior, which brought about her unfortunate marriage. In her worst moments, Mary recalled her miserable childhood and the mocking remarked of her friends. So, there was no chronological order in her mind since the past and the present were blended together. She went back and forth in her thoughts and could not realize her presence from time to time. Hence, the mystery in the tragic life of Mary Turner, the protagonist could only be perceived better through the analysis of her background and her character. Thus, the novel turns back to the childhood of Mary Turner displaying all her conflicts and the motives hidden unconsciously even from herself.

Like Mary, Anna in The Golden Notebook, led a painful childhood life which induced her to search for identity. She came out at the age of fifteen and worked as a nurse and also as a typist for the survival purpose. She portrayed the character of Ella in her novel The Shadow of the Third as a mirror image of herself. She described the story that Ella found within herself with her parents. She said that Ella visited her father, asking him about his relationship with her mother. He told her that her mother seemed to be sexless and was extremely jealous as a sick cat. He said that she did not give a damn about him.

Thus Ella’s father exclaimed that all these family ties, family stuff, marriage and that sort of living seemed pretty unreal to him. He also told her that the people behaved well in the society, if they left each other alone, instead if they did not, then they became like cannibals. Lessing talks about this attitude as, “Yes, cannibals. People are just cannibals unless they leave each other alone.” (GN, 409). Thus Ella realized that her father remained alone withdrawing from his wife into books and this situation made him to write poetry and locked in drawers. This remark from her father about her mother started a new train of
thought for Ella. She got disappointed by the life led by her parents and started herself thinking that both men and women had to acknowledge the discontentment before victory.

I’ve got to accept the patterns of self-knowledge which means unhappiness or at least a dryness. But I can twist it into victory. A man and a woman—yes. Both at the end of their tether. Both cracking up because of a deliberate attempt to transcend their own limits. And out of the chaos’ a new kind of strength. (GN, 411)

With the same concept Lessing in the *Children of Violence* series, traces the intellectual development of Martha, a fictional heroine who resembles Lessing in several ways. Martha like Lessing, is a “child of violence” born at the end of World War I, and raised in the bleak post-war era of social struggle and also faced the tragedies of World War II. Martha’s struggling father in *Children of Violence* is a close portrayal of Lessing’s father Alfred Taylor and the author has admitted to her friends that much else in that series is autobiographical. In this series Lessing attempts to express her experiences of Africa and her growth and understanding of its complexities through her autobiographical heroine Martha. Lessing shares with Martha in her quest for freedom, hatred of oppression, sensitivity of mind and the visionary spirit. Dorothy Brewster, modern fiction writer, sees much more similarities between Lessing and Martha in her *Doris Lessing*. She says,

The young woman named Martha Quest in the series *Children of Violence* grows up like her creative Doris Lessing on a farm in central Africa has a father and a mother with some traits resembling those ascribed elsewhere by Doris Lessing to her own father and mother goes at eighteen or to earn her living in the capital of the colony as Doris Lessing went to Salisbury
and is there shocked and stimulated by new ideas and new relationships in
the rapidly changing conditions of the years before and during World War
II. We must assume that Doris Lessing in tracing Martha’s development has
not forgotten her own. (www.dorislessing.org/martha)

Thus their similarity again is most striking in their marriages and divorces and in their
migration to England and also in the sharing of their talents.

Martha’s parents indeed made her feel unwanted in their covert preference for
another son. It is interesting to note that this preference induces Martha, like the typical male
hero, to have a strained relationship to her parents. When Martha eventually decided to leave
the farm for an independent life in the city, she was driven by an urgent motive of self-
preservation. This decision of Martha is quoted by Lessing as

…she must leave her parents who destroyed her; so she went out of the
door, feeling the mud sink around her slight shoes, and down the path
towards a man who came darkly against stars which had been washed by
rain into a profusely glittering background to her mood. (MQ, 90)

Martha’s parents forced her to escape from them not only by making her to feel that
she was unable to express her intellect and imagination freely, but also suffocated her by
making her to feel that she was born in the “wrong” gender. Here Lessing particularly
focuses on the gender perspective by highlighting the fact that as a young woman in her
society, Martha is not given the same prerequisites in life as her brother and other young
men. As Ingrid Holmquist, the fiction writer, in his From Society to Nature. A Study of
Doris Lessing’s Children of Violence points out, “It was Martha’s family which brought her
in touch both with bourgeois demands on woman and with conflict-ridden relationships between parents and children and men and women.” (28)

The theme of family relationship is given in great emphasis in this novel. Martha experiences her initial failure within her own family and her parental relationships are not resolved in a successful way. For example, Martha’s relationship with her mother was especially problematic. She perceived her mother as an enemy and she was against her who was ready to go to attack. She described her mother as a fatal demon always took possession of her, so that at the slightest remark from her mother she was impelled to take it up, examine it, and hand it back, like a challenge. Consequently the mother and the daughter fought with a great deal and it almost became a part of daily routine. The underlying hostility which depicted the mother-daughter relationship took its toll on Martha; after a fight with her mother over money. It seemed no one could stir up as negative emotions in Martha as her own mother.

Labovitz, the critic, claims in his The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century, that Martha’s infectious relationship with her mother is of utmost significance to her journey of self-discovery: “an important aspect of Martha’s quest is to liberate herself from the inhibiting hold of unsatisfactory mother-daughter relationship in order to become a totally realized human being.” (148)

Accordingly Martha used two potent weapons in her strife to break free from her mother’s controlling interference, by acknowledging her sexuality and by escaping to the city towards independence. The novel, Martha Quest starts with the description of Martha, as a 15-year-old girl who lives with her British parents on a colonial farm. She is reluctantly listening to her mother’s discussion with her friend Mrs. Van Rensberg about marriage that
it is right and a man will never marry a girl whom he does not respect. On hearing the conversation she reacts with anger in her mind and calls the two women as disgusting. Serving as deterring example, it is too obvious that the not-so-lovable Mrs. Quest and her uneducated friend are not equipped to function as role models to the young Martha. Just like other female characters of Lessing, Martha is a product of social surroundings and represents the value of her society. She is also a daughter of her mother and the relationship they have with each other affects her individual and social development.

Nancy Chodorow the author of The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender points out an oscillating relationship between the little girl and her mother. She says that the mother is the primary love object and the object of identification. Before a girl could fully develop extra familial commitments, she must face her entanglement in familial relationship. The transition from childhood to adolescence is more complicated for girls because issues during this period concerned a girl’s relationship to her mother. The nature of female personality arises specially from the mother-daughter relationship and this is due to the fact that mothers feel ambivalent towards them, and she often wants to keep her daughter close, but at the same time she also pushes her into adulthood. This ambivalence creates anxiety in the daughter and provokes attempts by her to break away from a coherent self. For example, Martha’s decision to leave home is greatly affected by her urge to get away from her mother.

In order to break away from the mother, a daughter takes what steps she can obtain towards internal feelings of individuation as well as relational stability and external independence. A struggle for psychological liberation from the mother is often the central issue for the girl during her pubertal period. On the one hand, a girl tries to retain her love
and identification towards her mother, but on the other hand she is not in ease with this identification. Related to this view, Nicole Joule, a literary critic, observes in the article, “Of Mud and Other Matter- Children of Violence” that “even though a daughter hates her mother she may simultaneously feel an underlying pull towards her, and she fears that if she relaxes her guard she will identify with her mother completely.” (104) With the help of the phenomenon it is possible to explain why Martha feels, on the one hand close to her mother but, on the other hand dreads her mother and rebels against her.

The father is often emotional in the background, whereas the mother-daughter relationship includes issues of weight, clothes and body. According to the psychoanalyst, Chodorow in The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, “Fathers and men are often idealize because they serve in part to break a daughter’s primary unity with and dependence on her mothers” (www.dorislessing.org/martha), since the father provides a last ditch escape from maternal omnipotence, and becomes often a remote figure who has a position of distance and ideological authority in the family. His role may be best understood through the interpretation which mother makes, and due to this it cannot be difficult for the daughter to develop her relationship with him. She often bends to repudiate her mother’s views that “blind” her when she tries to construct her own view of the world and relationships.

In Martha’s case, the father has been shown as a remote figure, and she experiences this because she feels that that the mother stands between her and her father. Mrs. Quest has the power in the family, and the clashes between her and Martha pushes the father more and more in the background. Struggling against her mother acquires so much energy that Martha does not concentrate much on her relationship to her father. Luckily, Martha’s relationship
with her father, Alfred Quest, was less difficult, although he was a sickly man who was
captured in the Great War in which he participated. He spent most of his time in reveries of
the war and disliked being disturbed. It was evident that Martha tried to get her father’s
attention and approval, but failed in her attempt. Feeling ignored, she referred to him as a
ghost, someone who was present but simultaneously absent. The antagonistic home
atmosphere upset Martha’s father who got tired of his two fighting women. It was Alfred
who dropped his head and muttered, half-guiltily that he was simply could not stand this
damned fight, and he exclaimed that both of them pleaded to him for help.

Martha was disappointed in her father who failed to support her in her maternal
conflicts. It was a domestic triangle whereas Alfred was caught in a conflict of loyalty
between his two women who wanted his support, but he seemed unwilling to choose sides.
Although he came across as a rather absent father figure, and it was proved that he filled a
parental function for the adolescent Martha. He sometimes shared a private intimacy,
discussing different matters. However, when Martha wanted to talk about her mother Mr.
Quest became irritated. This irritation was expressed like, “Oh Lord, Matty, What do you
want me to do?” (MQ, 75). Thus he exclaimed his frustration towards the end for being
captured in between his two womenfolk forever.

In her theory Chodorow emphasizes the other side of the development process like
mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like themselves. In contrast to their
daughters, mothers regard their sons to be likely to stay outside the oedipal relationship, and
they often consider their relation to their sons to be easier than their daughters. This is also
the case in Mrs. Quest’s relationship to Martha. Mrs. Quest continually reminds Martha that
her brother is the kind of child who irritates her, and it has been shown that the fact that Mrs.
Quest prefers Martha to be a boy. This attitude of her mother fundamentally affects their whole relationship as well as Martha’s own development.

Marianne Hirsch, in *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, utters that the heroines acting as daughters refuse to obey the conventional heterosexual romance and marriage plots. Likewise Martha eventually does reject the conventional constructions of femininity; for example, she separated from her daughter, and refused to choose motherhood when she opposed her husband by not getting pregnant again. Secondly, the fact that Martha reaches maturity after she has been able to break away from her mother. When Martha left her parent’s farm it was clear that she also left her childhood behind her, and a new developmental phase of her life began. Lessing describes that, “She felt as if a phase of her life had ended and that now a new one should begin…” (MQ, 101).

Thus Martha perceives of her move to the city towards independence as a new beginning is evident in the following statement: “She was a new person, and an extraordinary, magnificent; an altogether new life was beginning.” (MQ, 102)

Martha had a very high expectation of the city; feeling excited at the prospect of ridding herself of her parents’, and in particular her mother’s, influence on her life. She had the opinion to leave home for an independent life in the city to focus in herself and her development. In this respect Lessing’s *Martha Quest* is comparable to its male counterpart. Martha was thus granted more freedom crucial since she felt that her parents would destroy her if she continued to stay on the farm. She believed that the cities offered independence for her, as it did for the typical male hero. Ellen Rose, the co-editor of the journal “Doris Lessing’s Citt a Felice” in Sprague, Claire &Tiger, Virginia (ed) “Critical Essays on Doris
Lessing” says that, “to Martha the city’s order and hierarchy seem tempting because they allow for change and flexibility.” (142).

Nevertheless, when Martha had left home for the city her mother interfered with her “boyfriend concerns”, leaving Martha as usual with a bad sign. The novel illustrates this as, “She knew that because of her mother’s interference something unpleasant would happen, because it always did” (MQ, 158). Behaving as a typical controlling mother, Mrs. Quest meddles into Martha’s affairs which she perceives as her own. Paradoxically, although she has ostensibly rejects her daughter; she is unwilling to let her go. Mrs. Quest’s repudiation, however, provokes Martha to find adequate female role models outside her home, as discussed above.

Consequently, in the city Martha found a potential role model in her landlady Mrs. Gunn. This kind of caring woman instructively told Martha how she should treat men as: “…you must keep men in their place, so they know from the start they’re not getting something for nothing” (MQ, 118). This lesson about men is taught in a more direct manner to her than her mother who always tries to laugh off issues concerning sex. However Mrs. Gunn rather had the function of a substitute mother to Martha, which was evidenced in her statement in the same novel as: “if you want anything, just come to me. I know young things don’t want to be nagged at, but think of me like a mother.” (MQ, 119)

Thus Mrs. Gunn showed maternal concern for Martha in a way she was not used to, and she accepted her landlady’s interference in her life far better than her own mother’s. In contrast to the typical female heroine, Martha found herself a substitute mother. It should be noted though, that it was not said in so many words that Martha felt provoked to search for one. However, what she actively searched for in her life were her role models.
Martha had a friendship which was very valuable to her, with two Jewish boys, Joss and Solly Cohen. Providing her with books on psychology, philosophy, sexuality, sociology, politics and religion, they encouraged and promoted her self-education. Yet Martha’s relationship with them was anything but easy and conflict free, for several reasons. The important one was her mother’s anti-semitic belief and this aversion regarding friendship was not only because that Martha spent time with Jews, but also that she read literature of their choosing. Here Martha Quest deviates from the pattern of the typical female Bildungsroman in that Martha has acquired mentors who guide her, which she has in common with the male hero.

Moreover, Martha had ambivalent feelings towards the Cohen boys. On the one hand, she craved for literature to read which helped her to increase her self-knowledge, and on the other hand, when they meet on a threesome the atmosphere was strained. So Martha indeed had her clashes with them often. When she found out from her friend Marnie that Joss had amorous feelings for her, she broke off friendship with them. However, after awhile she missed them and decided to renew her friendship with them because there was no one else who could help her. She wanted them to tell her what she must read. As Martha in Cohen found valuable mentors to guide her; she wanted to be on strictly friendly terms with them.

Hence Martha had created male mentors, which she thus had in common with Buckley’s hero. Especially when Martha was troubled and at a loss of what to do, she desired his opinion and received his advice, that if only she could speak to Joss, he would know at once what it was she ought to do. Martha, then, did not follow the traditionally expected female course of development since she found a mentor and, importantly, a male
one [who was not her husband]. What Martha admired most in this young man was his self-assurance and capacity to know what he wanted and how to get it. Her faith in his guidance was proved by her taking his advice seriously. He provocingly asked her, “Why don’t you be a brave girl and into town, and learn a thing or two?” (MQ, 85). Thus by following his advice, Martha moved to the city and started earning her own living.

Interestingly, Martha preferred Joss’s support and guidance, not her own father’s who at times did act as a parental figure, probably because he was more emotionally absent than present in her life. Thus Joss saw her in a way her father did not. Lessing portrays this affair like: “…it seemed to her, just then, that Joss was the only person she had ever known who knew exactly how she felt, with whom she might behave as she liked – and get away with it…” (MQ, 145). It could moreover be argued that Martha in Joss had found a father figure who not only accepted her the way she was, but also gave her the mental and emotional guidance which she so badly needed. In this respect Martha Quest is again comparable to the male Bildungsroman in that the protagonist finds a substitute father.

Relationship to friends is a common theme of the female Bildungsroman. Notably, Martha did not have many friends while still living at the farm. Marnie Van Rensberg, the daughter of her mother’s friend, was the only female friend she had. Yet their relationship must be described as “a typical” friendship between adolescent girls. When Marnie came to visit Martha at the farm, the atmosphere between them was awkward, almost hostile. The reason for this awkwardness must be attributed to Martha’s unwillingness to be intimate with Marnie, whom she felt with different values in life. Later, when they both removed into the cot, they talked about “old times” when they met. Yet, although they had known each other since childhood and seemed equally unfit to adjust them to city life. Thus the
relationship between the friends was illustrated in the same novel as, “But they liked each other; while they made small talk, their eyes expressed regret-for what? That they could not be friends?” (MQ, 266)

Hence, following the typical female Bildungsroman pattern, Lessing deals at length with her protagonist’s relationships to her parents and friends. In contrast to Labovitz’ definition of the female Bildungsroman, Martha had acquired a mentor, and notably a male one, which she had in common with the protagonist of the traditional Bildungsroman. Another atypical feature of Martha Quest was that Martha found a substitute father in her friend and mentor Joss. This reveals the fact that, an atypical feature of the novel is that the protagonist, apparently repudiated by her own mother, and feels compelled to seek a substitute maternal figure and finds one in her landlady Mrs. Gunn. Another atypical feature is that Martha has the opportunity to move into the city in search for independence, which in effect is characteristic of the male protagonist’s developmental trajectory. Significantly, by rendering the female protagonist a substitute father figure, a male mentor and the possibility of an independent life in the city, the novel Martha Quest in these aspects follows the pattern of the traditional Bildungsroman, which has notably admired by many critics.

In search for increased self-knowledge, Martha moves from rather isolated farm life in the countryside to the larger community of the city. It can be argued that Martha’s colleagues in the office, as a female community in which she participates as a co-worker, mediate her integration into society. It can also be claimed that they have the function of role models to her, which promotes her search for selfhood as this quest is facilitated in the company of other women. She admires her colleagues as they have a qualification she lacks, which makes her feel incompetent and out-of place when she is first working in the office.
Lessing pictures the attitude of Martha as, “She was surprised and flattered, for all the women in the office seemed so immeasurably above her, in their self-assurance and skill, that she saw them through a glowing illusion.” (MQ, 121)

It is obvious that Martha looked up to these women and that she was spurred to become as qualified as they were. She was thus motivated to start studying in order to get a certificate. The largely positive picture she had of her co-workers, then, was in sharp contrast to her image of her mother and Mrs. Van Rensburg whom she found lacking. Her boss Mr. Cohen’s personal secretary Mrs. Buss, seemed especially enviable to Martha. At that moment, Martha had the ambition to replace her.

Yet the office women offered ambivalent role models to Martha as her aim was to become something more than “just” a secretary. She dreamt about becoming a freelance writer or journalist. While she admired these women, she allowed herself to have more potential than they did. Mr. Cohen’s negative statement about his female employers most probably influence Martha’s attitude towards them. He described them in the novel as, “You don’t want to get like these girls here… just waiting till their boy friends fetch them at half past four, and out all night and then so tired next day they just sit yawning” (MQ, 123).

Although Martha perceived herself as more ambitious than her female colleagues, she nevertheless came to follow their example in this respect too, waiting for her boyfriends to pick her up from work and then going dancing all night.

Nevertheless, it is clear that, Martha’s colleagues had the function of temporary role models, in that they set a professional example to her which she aspired to follow [i.e. in a restricted sense]. Theoretically, the women in the office could serve as female figures that Martha could identify with. However, Martha’s ambivalence towards her colleagues
spoke against such an assumption; she did not genuinely look up to them as felt herself capable of more than simply having a career as a secretary. Incidentally Martha established contact with another group of women who had the potential function of role models to her. For example, she met the women in the left book club who had similar social values as she had. Following the advice of her friend Joss, Martha attended a gathering with this mixed-sex leftist discussion group.

According to Labovitz’s *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century* the female heroines often suffer from a paucity of models to follow. Related to her argument, Martha left her farm for the city, as she did not find a female community in her colleagues at the office. She was unable to find adequate role models within this wider community of the city. Therefore she chose the alternative route to pursue her quest for self-knowledge in solitude. *Martha Quest*, then, ends with the crucial question “Who was she to be like?” unanswered (14).

Lessing also emphasis the human need for development [especially of consciousness] and fears repetition, that is, a reproduction of social and mental conditions. For instance, Martha repudiated her own mother as a role model in order to promote her individual and social growth process. Leaving Martha thus with a lack of an adequate female figure to model herself on, Lessing nevertheless avoided a repetition of the social pattern of imitation. Having the power of a natural law, the existence of growth was undeniable. However, the individual had the possibility to choose whether to obey the law of development or not. Martha, for instance, chose to develop by rejecting her mother as a role model. As the growth of the human mind is of such importance to Lessing, a considerable
To Labovitz, Martha must seek her education outside the family fold where she is met only with strife, pain, and discouragement. As she comes into conflict with her parents who do not encourage her reading, Martha makes sure that she is provided with literature from another reliable source, viz. her mentors the Cohen brothers. Nevertheless she is discouraged by her reading too as she comes to learn that her life is predetermined and thus no change is possible. Lessing describes this unchangeable early life of Martha as,

Martha, in violent opposition to her parents’ influence on her was unalterable, and that it was much too late to change herself. She had reached the point where she could not read one of these books without feeling as exhausted as if she had concluded one of her arguments with her mother.

(MQ, 13)

Martha thus has ambivalent feelings towards self-education: on the hand, she desperately wants to increase her self-knowledge; on the other hand, she becomes depressed and powerless when she does not find the “right” answers.

In Martha Quest the message comes across that self-education means responsibility; yet a feeling of powerlessness is considered to be the biggest burden for the female heroine. For instance, Martha’s decision to educate herself gave beneficial effects to her self-development. Labovitz, in The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century, describes that reading has equipped Martha with “a potent weapon inside, a power to engage in passionate debates with her mentors Joss and Solly and at the same time to remain an impartial observer of her own mind” (158). Jean Pickering, the critic and essayist, in the article, “Martha Quest and the Anguish of Feminine Fragmentation” refers to this detached observer as, “this judging observer, critical of herself as well as
others, is the one constant factor in her personality…” (96). Martha’s comprehensive reading has thus provided her with an ability to observe her critically yet objectively, which remains a permanent characteristic of her personality.

Moreover, literature is not only Martha’s means towards independence from her parents, but also a therapeutic and religious function for her. Martha for example, turned to read for answers and comfort, when she experienced crises in her life. Needless to say, as a young woman of the 1930’s, Martha was subjected to the gender constraint of her society. Yet she was an ambitious young woman who attempted to break societal gender boundaries, to challenge her assigned female role. Martha therefore applied for a job at the Zambesia News, the local newspaper to gain a position which at the time would have been impossible for a woman to obtain.

Regarding career plans, which is a characteristic theme of the male and female, it seems that Martha is easily discouraged by setbacks. However, Martha is uncertain and wavering in her choice of a career, like a typical adolescent. Another interesting thing to be noted is, as concerns self-education, the protagonist’s mothers who show overt disproval of their reading habits. Mrs. Quest, quite upset, tells her daughter as mentioned by Lessing: “You are ruining your whole life, and you won’t take my advice” (MQ, 30). Thus the rebellious Martha reads not only with her aim of gaining self-knowledge, but also with the purpose of defying her controlling mother.

Thus the three heroines of Lessing like herself undergo painful practice in their childhood days and unconsciously repress the unhappy or dejected moments of the same. Moreover their revolt against reality kindles the suffering and their inability to implement their dream world or imaginary world into realism frustrates them further more.