

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE CONCEPT OF MADNESS IN DORIS LESSING'S 'THE FOUR GATED CITY'

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ABSTRACT



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Doris Lessing, winner of the coveted Nobel Prize for literature for the year 2008, is one of the most prominent modern English writers. Her thematic range varies widely - from feminism, colonialism, mysticism, psychoanalysis, history, politics to space fiction. This paper defines its modest scope by concentrating on her exploration of the concept of madness in her novel, *The Four-Gated City*, the last of her five novel sequence, *Children of Violence*. The novel shows how Martha achieves inner freedom and integrity and wholeness of self through psychological experience. She gains an understanding of her inner fragmentation and overcomes it by accepting and integrating the unacknowledged and unconscious darker aspect of herself into her awareness. Martha achieves this during her 'madness' by defeating her 'self-hater', which she recognises as her shadow or inner enemy. The novel gives a clear and detailed account of how Martha attains inner freedom i.e., freedom from inner fragmentation. The paper intends to analyse Doris Lessing's ideas on the concept of madness through a detailed account of Martha's struggle to attain 'individuation' or wholeness of self through 'madness'.

Keywords: *Doris Lessing, Psychoanalysis, fragmentation, Madness, Individuation.*



INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing is a significant modern English writer and the winner of the coveted Nobel Prize for literature for the year 2008. She has expressed herself through various literary forms like novel, short story, drama and poetry. Her thematic range also varies widely from feminism, colonialism, mysticism, psychoanalysis, history, politics to space fiction. The paper makes a critical analysis of *The Four-Gated City*, the last novel of her novel sequence *Children of Violence*. This five-novel sequence traces the life of Martha Quest in her quest for freedom through five phases of her life. *The Four-Gated City* shows Martha exploring her deeper self. It shows her in a spiritual rather than a social quest. The novel makes a shift in the form of Martha's quest from the external to the internal; from political and social involvements to psychological, philosophical and mystical apprehension of the nature of reality as well as her own 'self'.

Employed as Mark Coldridge's secretary, Martha Quest soon becomes a permanent friend and indispensable member of the household. She becomes the maternal figure who takes care of the children and a person who struggles to hold the house together. Mark's wife Lynda, whose extrasensory powers are labelled as madness, is tormented by psychiatrists with their machines and pills. The constant goal of Martha's life is not merely to cope with the situations of ordinary life, but to strive for 'individuation' or wholeness of the self also. Struggling with conflicting emotions, Martha feels that she is going to have a breakdown. She then goes to Lynda - there was no one else who could understand her. Lynda's presence helps Martha in

achieving visionary powers. She begins to 'hear' the thoughts of Mark and Paul - experiencing others' experiences. Staying with Lynda, observing her keenly when she is in her 'mad state', Martha gradually understands Lynda and her language. She enters Lynda's region, and gets a deeper knowledge. Lynda's basement room becomes a place where Martha discovers new possibilities in herself and enters new territories. It dawns upon her what Lynda was fighting. It was nothing but 'the self-hater'. Martha now clearly understands Lynda's tragedy. Lynda was forced to confront the self-hater, the antagonist, when she was too young to fight. Lynda was very young when she began to hear what her stepmother thought, and being young and not knowing that ordinary people do not hear thoughts, told it and was treated by psychiatrists. Later, she began to hear unfriendly and accusing voices which said she had been cruel to her father. She kept quiet and so they thought she was cured. Then, she married Mark and later, cracked under the attacks of her inner self-hater, who said that she was unkind to Mark and she was again handed over to Dr. Lamb.

In Lynda's room, Martha observes that along the wall, there was a clear space or a runaway, as if there was a second invisible wall against which tables, chairs, bookcases were arranged, a yard or so inside the visible wall. Lynda moved around the space between these two walls, staring, and she pressed her palm against it in a desperate, urgent way, as if it would enable her to step out of the room. Or she turned her back to the wall and bumped herself against it. When Martha tells her that she is not locked, that there is a door through which she can walk out, Lynda moves faster. Observing Lynda



keenly, Martha understands her mind and remembers that in childhood, she too had entered this region of the human mind. "She knew this area of the human mind where the machinery of ordinary life seemed more than absurd, seemed a frightening trap.... She had felt this as a tiny child looking at grownup people..." (Lessing, 508). Remembering this, Martha wept bitterly for having forgotten it. Lynda looked up and smiled a knowledgeable smile.

Martha hears the thoughts of Mark, Paul and Lynda. Later, she explores her own mind. Alone in a room, she encounters the 'self-hater' in her, who always said she was bad, wicked, cruel, callous etc. Martha pushes this self-hater with great difficulty and writes down "The self-hater. This is where Lynda was defeated. She is never free of this." (Lessing, 551) With great calmness of mind she faces the self-hater. However, looking at her from outside, (a woman lying on the floor, beating her head on it, crying, accusing an unknown assailant of cruelty, or sitting in an intense thought which knotted her muscles) one could not guess she had that calmness of mind. She now experiences what Lynda was experiencing, and urges the self-hater to go away." ...go away, I can't bear it. A life-sentence in hell." (Lessing, 553)

In this process Martha comes to know certain aspects of her own mind – to do with sadism, masochism. The pleasure in hurting. After three days of this struggle, she understands one more thing: that she has two opposing parts in her own self. She discovered herself uttering slogan-like phrases or feeling emotions which were the opposite of what she, the sane and rational Martha believed. She writes down: "The Tortured and the Torturer. Am

being both. Am not just the pain-maker. Pictures on the (inner) television set: smoke from the gas-chamber in the concentration camp... the rugged bit of refuse (me) pushed into the gas-chamber and the uniformed woman (me) who pushed." (Lessing, 554)

These experiences make Martha understand Human Mind in general, as Jean Pickering opines, "Her journey into strange rooms leads her, paradoxically enough, not merely to the greater "I" ness, but to greater "we" ness too, for as she pushes further into the hidden recesses of her own being, she discovers that she makes contact with states of mind common to all humanity." (Pickering, 27) Thus, in this process Martha gains insight into her own mind, and achieves a higher understanding. She gains victory in her mental struggle with the self-hater by suppressing it. The self-hater is the shadow dimension of her personality, of which she achieves integration; only then she achieves wholeness of self or "individuation".

When Martha shares the 'energy of madness' with Lynda, images of electricity – of vibration, wires, dynamos, volts, currents, tension and fields fill Martha's monologue. Doris Lessing accepts the views of R.D. Laing, the radical British Psychiatrist, that the so-called mentally ill are those who are particularly receptive to reality and are able to hear the thoughts of other people by simply tuning into their 'wavelengths'. These special individuals are sometimes unable to control their above-normal experiences: "There were people whose machinery had gone wrong, and they were like radio sets, which, instead of being tuned into one programme, were tuned into a dozen simultaneously. And they didn't know how to switch them off. Even to imagine



the hell of it was enough to make one want to run, to cover one's ears." (Lessing, 523)

Even if such sensitive 'receivers' are not attuned to a dozen programmes at once, they may also be destroyed if they get stuck on a channel that transmits only negative messages. This was the case with Lynda.

Martha now perfectly understands all this, and feels that the human race itself is at fault. Because the human race knew that its primitive members used all kinds of senses not used by itself – telepathy, visions etc. It knew that members of its own kind experienced these capacities at certain times.

"But it was incapable of putting these facts together to suggest the possibility that they were calling people mad who merely possessed certain faculties in embryo." (Lessing, 538 - 39)

Martha thinks that if Lynda had been in a society where 'hearing voices' was not sick; if she had met someone who could suggest to her that when she heard her stepmother saying she hated her; that it was just a bad mood or fantasy; who might have asked her if she liked to be judged by her fantasies; or if one of the doctors said that she should keep quiet if she did not want to be locked up; then she would not have been a mental cripple.

It is suggested that an alarming number of people in the novel who suffer nervous breakdown do so because, as Betsy Draine writes, "Like Lynda, they are being worn down by the tension between society's pressure to repress a body of knowledge that lies within them and the opposite pressure of the knowledge, which wants to force itself out into the open." (Draine, 59)

Feeling sorry for Lynda and people like her, Martha hopes for better things to come in the future - when truth would be admitted, and as we now talk of old times when people burned witches out of ignorance, soon we will be saying : " When they stopped torturing and killing witches, they locked people with certain capacities into lunatic asylums and told them they were freaks, and forced them into conformity by varieties of torture....By these means, these members of the population with capacities above normal (these people, now considered to be in the main line of evolution) were systematically destroyed...." (Lessing, 539 - 40)

In this novel, Doris Lessing echoes the Laingian premise that madness is vision. For some characters in the novel like Dorothy, Thomas and Sally-Sarah, madness and vision are also death. Mark, a visionary, survives. But Martha survives in a more meaningful way - as a promoter of the 'new children' born during the catastrophe which is detailed in Appendix.

Thus, though Lynda, her educator, seems to suffer a kind of defeat, Martha emerges a victor. She does not undergo Lynda's long history of institutionalisation and treatment, shock therapy, drugs etc. That history has taught Martha how to survive in the outer world of doctors, families and friends. She is able to hide her visionary powers and live in both the worlds – the one in which madness has become more subversive than Marxism, and the world of the seer and the hearer. While Lynda is defeated in her fight with the 'self-hater', Martha confronts it and with great difficulty defeats it and thus, emerges a victor in this mental struggle. During this 'mad' state, Martha realises how Thomas and Jack, her earlier companions, were defeated and



destroyed by the darker aspects of their own personality. Martha now understands that every person has a ruling passion, a driving need that in its extreme form, unbalances his personality, producing the inner enemy or the self-hater or the shadow that may become his madness. This is the psychological basis for breakdown. If not recognised as part of the self, the emotional energy of the shadow is projected onto the outer world and may result in self-division that drives one mad. She also realises the collective aspect of the shadow; that groups of people, whole nations, like individuals, can be plugged into hating, as Germans did under Hitler. Thus, Martha's experience of madness gives her the knowledge of the shadow, the darker aspect, which human race must understand and try to defeat – as Martha defeats her own shadow. Martha's process of 'individuation' thus leads her not merely an understanding of her own nature, but of the whole human race. Through madness, Martha also gains a vision of the future – a vision of an ideal four-gated city, along with a shadow city of poverty and hunger.

In this way, Doris Lessing in her *The Four Gated City* shows how madness leads to an understanding of inner fragmentation and the consequent achievement of 'individuation' or wholeness of self.

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