Doris Lessing

Doris Lessing:

Poetics of Being and Time

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To my husband Nooman Aouadi

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This book is also dedicated to my students and to all those who study and love Doris Lessing, a writer for all times.

LESSING'S WORLD OF WORDS

Anyone who has looked deeply into the world will probably guess the wisdom that lies in human superficiality. An instinct of preservation has taught people to be flighty, light, and false. We occasionally find both philosophers and artists engaging in a passionate and exaggerated worship of "pure forms".
—Nietzsche, 53

DORIS LESSING'S ALCHEMICAL DYSTOPIAN UNIVERSES

> Man is not alone; is not a glorious individual - or not in the way he thinks. His 'personality', what he ordinarily knows of himself, is an assembly of shadows, of conditioned reflexes; his real individuality is hidden and will emerge slowly during the process of learning, like a stone in the tumbling machine which will show, after a rough passage, its real intrinsic qualities.
> —*Time Bites*, 259

Doris Lessing exposed many literary genres. Her texts are imbued with didactic messages. She imagines dystopian universes to compel her readers to cogitate about Being and Time. "Her fiction is visionary and revisionary in getting us to see that our reality is not the whole of reality and to imagine an elsewhere" (Greene, 20).

In the two volumes of her autobiography *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1998), she narrates her life haunted by the dystopian engraved images of war, which she hardly could bury in her books. In her gothic novel *The Fifth Child* (1988) and its sequel *Ben in the World* (2000), she invents a monstrous creature, rejected by society because it does not fit its standards and norms; Ben Lovatt becomes the incarnation of society's sins. In her first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and her anthology *African Laughter* (1993), she portrays the dystopian colonialist past in Africa and highlights its ever-present traces.

Both *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) narrate strange journeys. In *Memoirs*, a middle-aged woman in a futuristic sphere escapes from chaos into a world behind the wall of her living room; she sways between the claustrophobic atmosphere of her house, the violent world outside, and the future-past she finds behind the wall. In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Lessing narrates the journey of her protagonist Charles Watkins, lost within the cobweb of his unconscious; he establishes an analogy between his strange inner universe and dystopian reality.

The Nobel laureate tackles a postmodern dystopian reality, that of terrorism, in her novel *The Good Terrorist* (1985) and her book *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* (1987). These narratives unveil truths and transfigure history. She also implicitly warns about human degeneration in

her futuristic space fiction narratives *The Sirian Experiments* (1980) and *Shikasta* (1979) that both portray dystopian realities and alert the readers to their apocalyptic impacts.

Lessing writes to build an objective view of being and time, analysing history and using her characters as vivid testimonies to the past. They incarnate personal traumas as well as collective memories. Her fiction is imbued with both history and didacticism; she writes the past for the future and claims literature as the strongest weapon to defy time and debate being.

‘TO BE OR NOT TO BE’: THE QUESTION OF THE SOCIAL PERSONA IN DORIS LESSING’S FICTION

> What is the Good? It’s possible that in our time the Good looks terrible. May be out of destruction there will be born some new creature. I don’t mean physically. What interests me more than anything is how our minds are changing, how our ways of perceiving reality are changing. The substance of life receives shocks all the time, every place, from bombs, from the all-pervasive violence. Inevitably the mind changes.
> —*A Small Personal Voice*, 70

Can we write objectively about people? Is it possible to report history objectively? Can we objectively understand being in the world? Can we reach an objective truth about our existence? Can others see, consider, and judge us objectively, without considering established relationships? Does ‘the social persona’ embody a subjective view of the real self? In *Learning How to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way* the Sufi scholar Idries Shah asserts, “Man has to come to understand how to see himself as he really is, so that he can achieve something in the area which he calls 'what he might be'.” (56) This paper is about divided selves in Lessing’s fiction; it juxtaposes social identity and the real inner self.

Lessing’s writings provide objective/subjective views about being in the world through her characters’ divided selves and even in some novels schizophrenic selves. The writer is convinced that objectively cogitating about being is the way towards learning how to learn and achieving inner growth, peace, and fulfilment.

Anna Wulf: The Divided Self

The Golden Notebook is about experiencing Communism and believing in political illusions; Anna Wulf incarnates Lessing’s subjective/objective views about the Communist phase she went through. When the protagonist started her writing career she argued:

> I remember very clearly the moments in which that novel was born. The pulse beat, violently; afterwards, when I knew I would write, I worked out what I would write. The 'subject' was almost immaterial. Yet now what interests me is precisely this – why did I not write an account of what had happened, instead of shaping a 'story' which had nothing to do with the material that fuelled it. Of course, the straight, simple, formless account would not have been a 'novel', and would have not got published, but I was genuinely not interested in 'being a writer' or even making money. I am not talking now of that game writers play with themselves when writing, the psychological game – that written incident came from that real incident, that character was transported from that one in life, this relationship was the psychological twin of that. I am simply asking myself: Why a story at all – not that it was a bad story, or untrue, or that it debased anything. Why not, simply, the truth? (*The Golden Notebook* 77)

Lessing is also puzzled by her own texts through which she tries to understand being in the world. The novelist tries to objectively analyse the Communist phase she went through by letting Anna excavate her deepest thoughts and feelings.

Anna Wulf engages in the process of historicizing her lifetime experiences in a golden notebook is made up of four notebooks: the black one is about her life in Central Africa in World War II, the red one is about her Communist phase, the yellow one is about her love affairs and the blue one gathers her inner dreams and deepest thoughts. Lessing explains: "My major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped." (*A Small Personal Voice*, 36) But the novel fails to provide any objective view about Communism, war, and love; it rather emphasises the "theme of 'breakdown', which, sometimes when people 'crack-up' it is a way of self-healing, of the inner self's dismissing false dichotomies and divisions" (*A Small Personal Voice*, 28). "Her fictive 'self' Anna" (Scott, 1997) could only narrate her own feelings and perceptions, whereas being objective implies freedom from any subjective implication.

Anna Wulf asserts: "I became 'a Communist' because the left people were the only people in the town with any kind of moral energy, the only people who took it for granted that the colour bar was monstrous. And yet there were always two personalities in me, the 'Communist' and Anna, and Anna judged the Communist all the time. And vice-versa. Some kind of lethargy I suppose." (82) This state of confusion impedes Anna from objectively considering political ideologies; she resorts to writing:

> I came upstairs from the scene between Tommy and Molly and instantly began to turn it into a short story. It struck me that my doing this – turning everything into fiction – must be an evasion. Why not write down, simply,

> what happened between Molly and her son today? Why do I never write down, simply, what happens? Why don't I keep a diary? Obviously, my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself. (211).

Though the four notebooks include subjective feelings about personal experiences, they narrate a witnessed history; Anna states, "The real crime of the British Communist Party is the number of marvellous people it has either broken, or turned into dry-as-dust hair-splitting office men, living in a closed group with other Communists, and cut off from everything that goes on in their own country." (307) The protagonist voices Lessing's subjective disillusions and views:

> I remember very clearly the moments in which that novel was born. The pulse beat, violently; afterwards, when I knew I would write. I worked out what I would write. The 'subject' was almost immaterial. Yet now what interests me is precisely this – why did I not write an account of what had happened, instead of shaping a 'story' which had nothing to do with the material that fuelled it. Of course, the straight, simple, formless account would not have been a 'novel', and would not have got published, but I was genuinely not interested in 'being a writer' or even in making money. I am not talking now of that game writers play with themselves when writing, the psychological game – that written incident came from that real incident, that character was transposed from that one in life, this relationship was the psychological twin of that. I am simply asking myself: Why a story at all – not that it was a bad story, or untrue, or that it debased anything. Why not, simply, the truth? (77)

Within that phase of confusion and disillusion, Anna started to cogitate and think; she stopped accepting ideologies unquestioningly. When Jack says, "[T]he idea of humanism will change like everything else," she firmly responds, "[T]hen it will become something else. But humanism stands for the whole person, the whole individual, striving to become conscious and responsible about everything in the universe. But now you sit there, quite calmly, and as a humanist you say that due to the complexity of scientific achievements the human being must never expect to be whole, he must always be fragmented" (*The Golden Notebook*, 307-8).

Kate Brown: Sins and Social Conventions

By trying to change her life and please herself, Kate had to transcend the social conventions she was confined to; she had to become a different woman, to free herself from social constraints. But her journey was quite

short, because "feeling guilty seems almost a definition of motherhood in this enlightened time" (*The Summer Before Dark*, 110), and because "she had lived among words, and people bred to use and be used by words" (270).

Kate tries to "learn through living" (7) and thinks, "We are what we learn. It often takes a long and painful time" (7). Life is "as good as theatre" (47) and grasping its rules was hard for the protagonist. Kate Brown could not make objective judgements because "her thermostat was set low" (48) and "it was seeming more and more as if she had several sets of memory, each contradicting the others" (59). She struggles to change and to survive within her inner turmoil. She is torn between her role of a mother and decent wife and her being a woman wanting to be loved. "She was like an old nurse who had given her years to the family and must now be put up with. The virtues had turned to vices, to the nagging and bullying of other people" (105).

Kate Brown is thus a woman in quest of truth; she tries to locate herself in the cosmos, she sometimes feels rejected but attempts to find her 'Way'. She goes through a cacophony of experiences and puts her femininity on trial. Her story incarnates a turning point in the life of every woman: "a web of nasty self-deceptions" (*The Summer Before Dark*, 256). At the end of the novel, she realizes:

> The mood she was in when she walked in at her front door again would be irrelevant: now *that* was the point, it was the truth. We spend our lives assessing, balancing, weighing what we think, we feel… it's all nonsense. Long after an experience which has been experienced as this or that kind of thought, emotion, and judged at the time accordingly – well, it is seen quite differently. That's what was happening, you think; and what you thought or felt about it at the time seems laughable, jejune. (256)

Lessing tries to excavate every woman's deepest feelings through Kate's feminine self, to liberate her readers from the conventional social barricades. In *Time Bites*, she quotes Idries Shah, "If you are uninterested in what I say, there's an end to it. If you like what I say, please try to understand which previous influences have made you like it. If you like some of the things I say and dislike others, you could try to understand why. If you dislike all I say, why not try to find out what has formed your attitude?" (267-268) According to Shah, a personal view is always as questionable as that of the arguer; both could be objective/subjective.

Charles Watkins: The Social Persona v. the Inner Self

Charles Watkins is a dissenter; he refuses to be defined by others and feels an urgent need to free himself from social conventions:

> They hold me down, they cradle me down, they hush and they croon, SLEEP and you'll soon be well. I fight to rise, I struggle as if I were a mile under heavy sour black earth and above the earth slabs of stone, I fight so hard and I shout, no, no, no, no, don't, I won't, I don't want, let me wake, I must wake up, but Shhhhhh, hush, SLEEP and in slides the needle deep and down I go into the cold back dark depth where the sea floor is an earth of minute skeletons, detritus from eroding continents, fishes' scales and dead plants, new earth for growing. But not me, I don't grow, I don't sprout, I loll like a corpse or a drowned kitten, my head rolling as I float and black washes over me, dark and heavy. (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, 155)

But the doctors objectively declare him "mad"; here objectivity is synonymous with conformism. Doctor Y thinks, "Patient has religious delusions. Paranoic. Disassociated" (163). Lessing defies through the character of Charles Watkins what she calls "group minds" (*Prisons*, 47): "Since my field is literature, it is there I most easily find my examples" (*Prisons*, 50).

She narrates the story of a literature professor who dives into a state of conscious unconsciousness, and as a result comes to experience self-denial and social exclusion. But though Doctor X and Doctor Y consider him to be amnesiac or mad, Charles is rather what Lessing calls an "original mind" (*Prisons*, 54). The novelist explains, "Of course, there are original minds, people who do take their own line, who do not fall victim to the need to say, or do, what everyone else does. But they are few. Very few. On them depends the health, the vitality of all our institutions" (*Prisons*, 53). Charles incarnates "the lonesome individualist who overturns conformity" (*Prisons*, 54).

Ben Lovatt: A Monster in the World

In a perfect family, there is no place for a monster-like child. Ben Lovatt's parents objectively claim: "Ben makes you think – all those different people who lived on the earth once – they must be in us somewhere" (*The Fifth Child*, 137). Ben has to die at the end, he commits suicide, "And Ben left: he had no home in this world" (*Ben in the World*, 35).

Lessing's *The Fifth Child* and its sequel *Ben in the World* are gothic novels with objective/subjective messages about our humanity. They narrate the struggle of a beast-like Ben who tries to survive within a conformist world that is incomprehensible to him. Ben is against the fixed social model subjugated by the authoritative power of the collectivity and his difference and non-conformism cause him to be rejected by both his family and society.

Ben Lovatt is just like Charles Watkins in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, who is classified by the doctors as an amnesiac. Both are rejected by society as being odd. But Lessing offers two different objective/subjective issues to her protagonists; Charles returns to society after a long journey of loss and cogitation within his unconscious, whereas Ben, the fascinating beast, leaves the world that rejected him and joins the vast universe of the unknown. While Charles's regained lucidity suggests the impenetrable gloomy side of human beings, Ben's final suicidal act occurs unexpectedly at the end of the novel, representing the repugnance of the monstrous world and his awareness that he must leave this hideous society and the unknown universe of his specie:

> He had been betrayed so dreadfully by these three who called themselves his friends – so he must feel; and they were afraid of what they would see. But he didn't turn, seemed to hang there by the rock face, one fist resting on it. Then he did turn himself about, with an effort: they could see it was hard for him. He seemed smaller than he had been, a poor beast. His eyes did not accuse them: he was not looking at them. Teresa dared to go to him and put her arm about him, but he did not feel it, or know she was there. He stumbled along beside her on the long walk back to the hut. On the path that had the precipice below it he did stop a moment and look down, but went on at a touch from Teresa. In the hut they put more fuel on the little fire and made tea and offered him some. He did not see them. Then – and it was so sudden they at first could not move – he left them and went bounding back along the path they had just come from. A silence. Then Teresa understood, and was about to run after him, but Alfredo put his arm around her and said, 'Teresa, leave him'. They heard a cry, and a slide of small stones, and silence. They slowly got up, slowly followed him. They made their way to where the precipice fell away from the path. There was Ben, far below, a pile of coloured clothing. His yellow hair was like a tuft of mountain grass. (*Ben in the World*, 176-177)

Johor the Messenger: Voice for the Deaf, Sight for the Blind

In Lessing's novel *Shikasta*, Johor unveils truths about human existence in those galaxies imagined by Lessing; he objectively warns about human subjectivity:

> Poor people of the past, poor poor people, so many of them, for long thousands of years, not knowing anything, fumbling and stumbling and longing for something different but not knowing what had happened to them or what they longed for. I can't stop thinking of them, our ancestors, the poor animal-men, always murdering and destroying because they couldn't help it. And this will go on for us, as if we were being slowly lifted and filled and washed by a soft singing wind that clears our sad muddled minds and holds us safe and heals us and feeds us with lessons we never imagined. And here we all are together, here we are… (*Shikasta*, 447)

Johor incarnates the voice of objective wisdom unheard by human beings entrapped within their subjective narrow visions of life, limited senses, and vulnerability. The messenger asserts, "Life? They did not have that conception: the thought of death as an ever-present threat was not in them" (*Shikasta*, 85).

Shikasta is a space fiction narrative that takes the reader into imaginary outer galaxies; like old fables, it narrates stories and aims to warn and teach. Lessing claims:

> It is by now commonplace to say that novelists everywhere are breaking the bonds of the realistic novel because what we all see around us becomes daily wilder, more fantastic, incredible. Once and not so long ago, novelists might have been accused of exaggerating, or dealing overmuch in coincidence or the improbable: now novelists themselves can be heard complaining that fact can be counted on to match our wildest invention. (*Shikasta*, 8)

Thus, the imaginary galaxies are allegories of the real world. She talks about the genre in an interview: "Actually, it never crossed my mind with these later books that I was writing science fiction or anything of the kind! It was only when I was criticized for writing science fiction that I realized I was treading on sacred ground. Of course, I don't really write science fiction (Qtd in Frick, 11). She adds:

> It was a way of telling a story—incorporating ideas that are in our great religions. I said in the preface to Shikasta that if you read the Old Testament and the New Testament and the Apocrypha and the Koran you find a continuing story. These religions have certain ideas in common, and

> one idea is, of course, this final war or apocalypse, or whatever. So I was trying to develop this idea. I called it "space fiction" because there was nothing else to call it. (Qtd in Frick, 11)

Her space fiction narratives allow her to venture into outer layers of being, both inner universes and outer spaces. In her texts, she exploits her knowledge of the three great religious texts to teach through fable-like narratives. Her protagonists float subjectively in the universe like tragic heroes unaware of the fact that they are bringing about their own downfall. Indeed, instead of listening to Johor's warnings, they subjectively pray:

> Save me, God,
> Save me, Lord,
> I love you,
> You love me.
> Eye of God,
> Watching me,
> Pay my fee,
> Set me free.... (*Shikasta*, 19)

Mujahiddins: Terrorists in the Air

"We are full of ignorance and prejudice and so are they" (*The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, 46). How could we judge war objectively? In *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* Lessing tries to provide an objective view of war, colonialism and terrorism; she blames the Russian invaders, the Mujahiddins, the media and even her helpless self for not having been able to prevent any war. But objectively, could any war be prevented? Lessing argues, "But I do wonder more and more: suppose people had been prepared to listen then…to the few voices who were shouting warnings, - would later disasters have been prevented?" (*The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, 71)

The Good Terrorist: Alice in Wonderland

The world sees Alice Mellings as a terrorist whereas Alice believes herself to be a revolutionary! The whole question is a matter of objectivity/subjectivity. How should she be considered? Victim or guilty? Is she a guilty victim? Doris Lessing explains how *The Good Terrorist* was inspired by the true story of a revolutionary who turned into a terrorist:

> We knew a girl who, from the age of eighteen or so became a revolutionary, with the language: 'We'll have to kill the reactionaries when we get into power'. But she always in a squat or group where she was the carer and the sharer, the cook, the general provider…Years ago, and by now most people have forgotten it, there was an 'accident' at Harrods in Knightsbridge. It was an ugly, brutal bombing…We - my friend and I- joked that it must have been the girl we called Alice. (*The Good Terrorist*, 13)

The Good Terrorist and *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* confront readers with Lessing's objective questioning of being a terrorist in times of war and revolution: "We should be asking, perhaps, '*Why* have we forgotten this terrible calamity?', 'What other calamities have we all chosen to forget?', 'What is it about certain types of disaster that numbs the human mind?'" (*The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, 20) The writer's questions remained unanswered and history continues to record human atrocities committed in the name of political ideology.

The Memoirs of a Survivor: Shadows Out of Time

Lessing creates a chaotic futuristic world. A stranger brings a young girl to a middle-aged woman; she notices that the girl is strange, as the protagonist puts it: "When brought to me first by the man, whoever he was, she was an elderly person, saw me very clearly, sharp, minutely, in detail" (*Memoirs*, 43). Emily lives in a "forlorn isolation" (*Memoirs*, 31) and does not communicate with the woman; she only cares for Hugo, "her yellow dog-like cat, or cat-like dog" (*Memoirs*, 44). The woman watches the young girl join gangs and have a barbarian lifestyle; she cannot help it. She finds refuge from these chaotic surroundings in "her visits behind the wall" (*Memoirs*, 37); as she puts it, "[I]t is as if two ways of life, two lives, two worlds, lay side by side and closely connected. But then, one life excluded the other, and I did not expect the two worlds ever to link up" (*Memoirs*, 25).

The protagonist experiences two worlds: an objective and a subjective one. The subjective world, the world behind the wall, was a better alternative; "...in that realm there was a lightness, a freedom, a feeling of possibility. Yes, that was it, the space and the knowledge of the possibility of alternative action" (*Memoirs*, 39). Lessing also escapes into the imaginary worlds of her fiction to escape objective reality. Which world is objective: the chaotic present moment? Or the past behind the wall? Objectively, "this is a history, after all, and I hope a truthful one" (*The*

Memoirs of a Survivor, 94); nonetheless, "we learn to like what we get" (*The Memoirs of a Survivor*, 90).

The Cleft: Of Gender, the Subjective Divide

Lessing questions the origin of the species; "there is a great deal it seems we do not know" (*The Cleft*, 259). *The Cleft* is an invitation to objectively examine the subjectivity of scientific and historical claims about the human species. David Lodge claims that history is an invention (99), and thus Lessing writes a metafiction that reinvents the history of the past and questions the future. In the novel, a Roman historian narrates the story of the Clefts and the Squirts or Monsters, and claims it is "Compiled from ancient verbal records, written down many ages after their collection" (*The Cleft*, 29); his report cannot be considered objectively narrated history because it is fuelled by both his academic background and Roman origins. But Lessing intended this subjectivity in order to compel her reader to find an objective interpretation of the past. The novel paves the way for a long debate about the origin of humanity, the fragility of beings and of being; it blurs the boundaries between past and present and warns about the future.

Lessing's Parents: Alternative History

Lessing stops narrating war and exorcising the scars of her past, and reimagines a better past for her parents, trying to have a different past, "trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free" (*Alfred and Emily*, viii). In this novel, Lessing does not try to be objective, she just tries to offer her parents a different past, as she puts it: "I have tried to give them lives as might have been if there had been no World War One" (*Alfred and Emily*, vii). But instead of adjusting history and burying trauma, she resurrects painful memories and revives bitter souvenirs: "It was such a bad time for everyone, the war and its aftermath, but particularly for my mother. We now know the war did have an end – 1939-45 – but while it dragged on, we didn't know, and no one foresaw the awfulness of the after-war years. It is so hard to convey the unremittingness of it all, the deadening slog" (*Alfred and Emily*, 256).

Time Bites: Metafictions

Reading is an experience; it is the way to an objective view of the world. Doris Lessing asserts: "I could say as an autodidact - a condition

that has advantages and disadvantages - that books have made me what I am" (*Time Bites*, 212). She insists on the importance of books: "To call oneself educated without a background of reading - impossible. Reading, books, the literary culture, was respected, desired, for centuries. Reading was and still is in what we call the Third World a kind of parallel education" (*Time Bites*, 69-70).

Time Bites is an anthology subtitled *Views and Reviews.* It is a collection of literary essays and criticism that entails the writer's literary heritage and focuses on the books that influenced her life and inspired her writings. She thinks, "the real education is a good library" (*Time Bites* 157). Reading is personal and subjective but learning objectively occurs no matter the book being read. *Time Bites* dives into Tolstoy, Virginia Woolf, David Herbert Lawrence amongst others' literature.

Prisons: Laboratories of Group Minds

Lessing asserts, "[Y]ou are living in a lunatic asylum" (63). We wear masks, we struggle to exist, we try to be objective…but we are confined to subjectivity…in fact, "What is useful is what survives, revives, comes to life in different contexts" (*Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, 71). In *Consciousness and the Novel*, David Lodge asserts, "[I]n a world where nothing is certain, in which transcendental belief has been undermined by scientific materialism, and even the objectivity of science is qualified by relativity and uncertainty, the single human voice, telling its own story, can seem the only authentic way of rendering consciousness" (87).

DORIS LESSING'S LITERATURE OF EXCESS

Lessing speaks to all of humankind and implores us to shake ourselves out of our lethargy.
—Galin, 31

Doris Lessing: In Praise of Excess

Doris Lessing is a writer who defies categorisation. She uses many literary genres and tackles a cacophony of themes. Her literature is stamped by her experience and the genres of her writing change with the different phases she went through: atheism, Communism, feminism, humanism and Sufism. Her lifetime experiences and her writings carry the prints of excess. The writer's poetics of excess arouse contradictory feelings; her fictional worlds drive us to cogitation. This abundance of experience and her background allowed her to win several literary prizes as well as the Nobel Prize for literature in 2007.

Lessing's literary career involves a cornucopia of success and excess: success in transmuting and transmitting her messages as well as excess of genres, excess of experience, excess of scepticism (nihilism), excess of criticism, excess of confusion and self-questioning, excess of knowledge, excess of love and hatred and excess of liberty and wisdom. In her case 'excess is success'. Her books were successful partly because of their successful excess. She is still most acclaimed for the novel she calls her "albatross" *The Golden Notebook* (1962).

Four Seasons of Excess

"I write as in legends or in fairy tales, by means of metaphors and analogies"[1]

Lessing's texts display wide reading of the classics (her literary heritage). Traces of Tolstoy, Woolf, Proust, amongst others, are present in her works. The writer draws on literary canons, and amalgamates past genres with postmodern writing techniques to build a literature of her own.

[1] Lessing qtd in Ingersoll, p 67.

She deconstructs subjective realities and imagines alternative worlds by name of distorting what we see as objective reality. In this context, the Slovenian philosopher Zizek explains in his book *The Parallax View* that, "fantasy is by definition not 'objective'...however, it is not 'subjective' ... Fantasy, rather, belongs to the 'bizarre category of the objectively subjective'" (170).

The multiple and various defamiliarising strategies Lessing develops in her texts reveal the importance of excess in metamorphosing a simple story into a way of cogitation and a means of seeking for the truth. Her works use and abuse genres, and some of her texts (like the two volumes of her autobiography *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*) inform their readers, whereas some others (like her space fiction narratives *Shikasta* and *The Sirian Experiment*) hide their implied messages.

Avalanche of Experiences

Lessing's memory is traumatised. Exorcised souvenirs and relics sway between excess, exhaustion and dearth. Her novels dwell on war scars, which excess of violence has the potential of leading to human degeneration. In fact, the writer herself embodies the ever-present wreckages of war. Out of what Derrida calls "an ever-present absence", out of deep pain, nostalgia and sorrow, she published in 2008 *Alfred and Emily*, a novel that imagined a better past for her parents, that could have been possible if only there have been no world wars. She confessed in an interview: "I have always observed incredible brutality in society. My parents' lives and the lives of millions of people were ruined by the First World War. But the human imagination rejects the implications of our situation. War scars humanity in ways we refuse to recognize" (Qtd in Ingersoll, 17).

Because of war, Lessing experienced dislocation; she moved from Persia (now Iran) to South Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to London. She witnessed colonialism, engaged in Communism; she married and divorced; she tried drugs and even experienced madness. She also experimented with being another self by publishing two novels as Jane Somers to publish; she claims that using a pseudonym "has been an extremely instructive experiment" (Qtd in Ingersoll, 146). She then dived into a moderate excess of spiritualism. In her case writing is at one time and the same remembering, cogitating and historicising; it is exorcising and burying, hiding and revealing.

Excess of Scepticism

The writer questions being, delves into confusion and nihilism seeking for truth, for a way out of meaninglessness, for a 'light at the end of the tunnel'.

In this context, the Sufi scholar Al Ghazali claims in his book *Deliverance from Errors*: "One should be most diligent in seeking the truth until he finally comes to seeking the unseekable. For primary truths are unseekable, because they are present in the mind; and when what is present is sought, it is lost and hides itself. But one who seeks the unseekable cannot subsequently be accused of negligence in seeking what is seekable" (5). Lessing sheds light on this state of floating in the universe in all her texts but mainly projects her way of deciphering the enigma of being in her space fiction narratives *Shikasta* and *The Sirian Experiment.*

Deluge of Feelings

Lessing experiences through her protagonists (Kate, Anna, Martha) and through her imagined worlds of words (Shikasta, Argos, prehistory, Africa, London) an amalgam of feelings. She narrates love, longs for a better past, expresses nostalgia for her homeless memories, thinks about human sin, and denies her sensibility to only find herself diving into emotional excess.

Excessive Criticism

"I had to be critical about everything, all my life" [2]

Lessing's texts entail implicit and explicit messages of blame and harsh socio-political criticism. She unveils the horrors of war and its fallacious ideologies; she criticises media and the hegemonic forces for imposing their own agenda and their own way of reading history in her book *The Wind Blows Away Our Words*; she penetrates into the psyche of the terrorist in her novel *The Good Terrorist* and points the finger of blame at what she calls in her book *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, "group minds" (47). Her most teasing texts in this perspective are *The Fifth Child* and its sequel, *Ben in the World*, where a monstrous child unveils society's excess of monstrosity; in *The Cleft* she re-examines genesis and the origin

[2] Lessing, qtd in Ingersoll, p 87.

of creation; *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* explores the unconscious and defies scientific hypotheses with spiritual exegeses.

Beyond Excess

Lessing's excess of genres, themes and implicit/explicit messages generates criticism, defies history and teases readers. Her works aim at producing deep social, political, and inner/outer psychological changes. The Nobel Laureate's multiple experiences, multiculturalism, and cornucopia of texts, themes and genres show how excess might be transformed into Art.

In her Nobel lecture, Lessing highlights the importance of writers and books: "The storyteller is deep inside every one of us... for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us - for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the mythmaker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative" (26).

Excess of Knowledge and the Way to Truth

Lessing's works emanate from an excess of knowledge, which leads her into an excess of rationality. The writer found answers in Sufism (during the 60's): "I read a book of Idries Shah, *The Searchers*, I realized that it answered many of my questions" (Qtd in Ingersoll, 66). She followed the road of excess (experience, criticism, nihilism), a way of excessive feeling; she reached the farthest edge of scepticism in an attempt to reach what Al Ghazali calls "the alchemy of happiness". The Sufis reject excess, but they go through excess to reach moderation. The Nobel Laureate thus drew on the Sufi poetics of excess (excess of metaphor, satire, tales, travel, knowledge) to produce a literature of excess that involved narratives of learning and teaching, of what Idries Shah calls "learning to learn". Lessing's works embody excess as a way to self-knowledge: emptying oneself and deconstructing being to end with an excess of wisdom and an ultimate truth.