Nadzieja Monachowicz
Białystok

Self-analysis versus social analysis in *The Four-Gated City* by Doris Lessing

Published in 1969, after *The Golden Notebook*, *The Four-Gated City* shares with that earlier novel a preoccupation with non-rational areas of experience, and in particular with the kind of consciousness most people would describe as abnormal, if not mad. What in *Martha Quest*, the first novel of the sequence, were isolated and elusive moments of extraordinary perception, most obviously separated from the rest of Martha's thinking, are here central to her cognitive process and to the novel – the true goal of her 'quest'.

Martha's visionary daydream at the beginning of he first novel lays the foundation for the four-gated city which gave the title to the fifth volume of the series. It introduces many of the themes of Lessing's later, fable like fictions. The vision is not a return to pastoral innocence, but of a city, a man-made order, its geometry (foursquare), expressing social and emotional harmony. Its children are 'many-fathered', expressing Martha's dissatisfaction with the conventional nuclear family structure. Black and white live harmoniously together in obvious contrast to Southern African society. The city is clearly a product of Martha's personal and political experience, as well as belonging to a tradition of Golden Age Utopias. As this vision develops, a discordant note is introduced by the exclusion from the city of anyone Martha dislikes, an act as divisive as the ideology she claims to reject. However, this vision remains more than a focus for petty discontents, since it is later related to experiences of a more profound nature. These illuminations usually come when Martha is not absorbed in self-analysis, bringing with them not heightened self-consciousness, but a slow integration into a sense of unity. These moments offer illumination of an uncomfortable kind, awareness of a very radical alternative to her existing way of life. In so doing, Martha's vision therefore raises questions and introduces concepts which cannot easily be dealt with within the conventions of realist fiction.

The five books in the *Children of Violence* series (1952-69) are strongly influenced by Lessing's rejection of a domestic family role and her involvement with communism. The novels are autobiographical in many respects, telling the story of Martha Quest, a girl growing up in Africa who marries young despite her desperate desire to avoid the life her mother has led. *Martha Quest* (1952), he first volume of the series, continues the African setting and the portrayal of conflicting female desires in *The Grass is Singing* (1950), Lessing's debut. In *A Proper Marriage* (1954), Martha's marriage to Douglas Knowell is, in spite of the birth of their child, put increasingly under stress by her political activities. For wartime, and the arrival of numerous RAF men in the city, have led many left-wingers like Martha to think more seriously about advocating an end to the 'colour bar'. When Douglas, a conventional civil servant, reacts badly, Martha decides to leave both him and her daughter. *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958) traces Martha's involvement with a number of men with whom she is more politically in tune, the most important being Anton Hesse, a Jewish refugee and dedicated Communist committees, but this marriage is also destined to failure. Martha marries Anton to save him from deportation as an enemy alien, and works for various Communist committees, but this marriage is also destined for failure. The unity of the Left breaks down too, with Anton and Martha's group becoming the smallest and least effective. In *Landlocked* (1965) Martha has her first really meaningful love affair with Thomas Stern, another Jewish refugee, his earlier radicalism, and – feeling increasingly out of place in her own country – prepares to leave for England, where the final volume begins.

The Four-Gated City (1969)[1], the last volume of the series is set in Post-War Britain. Martha is in London as the 1950s begin. We see Martha as a middle-aged woman drifting in search of a purpose. She has "grown up" and out of the strong political leanings she had as a youth, but ultimately finds herself involved in the new Communist movement of England. Martha takes a job as secretary/housekeeper for Mark Coldridge, a factory owner and writer. Over a stretch of years, middle-ageing Martha serves as factotum in the house on Radlett Street, as nurse and comforter for Mark's mad wife Lynda (who secludes herself in a specially built apartment in the basement) as Mark's mistress for a brief spell, as substitute mother for Mark's son Francis and his nephew Paul – but mainly as the observer and chronicles of the strange goings-on in the house and the feverish political activities of Mark's various assortment of relatives and friends. The last 50 pages of the novel offer a science-fiction projection into the future about the destruction of cities and populations by nuclear explosions and nerve-gases. Martha Quest, having watched her "Children of Violence" reap the whirlwind, herself dies on an island off the west coast of Scotland in the year 1997.

---

[1] D. Lessing, *The Four-Gated City*, New York 1969. Further references to this book as FGC and page number.

Like the earlier novels of the sequence, *The Four-Gated City* constructs a solid and specific historical reality showing striking similarities to Doris Lessing's account of her own arrival in London. Martha Quest is integrally part of the social history of the time – the Cold War, the Aldermaston Marches, Swinging London, the deepening of poverty and social anarchy. Lessing struggles with many troubling themes throughout this novel, one being the questionable value of mass movements and mass demonstrations against a government or society that allow dissenting voices to be heard – a society in which status quo is defended with frequently violent outcomes. Martha struggles to reconcile her desire to "do good" with her increasingly jaded view that the kids just don't know what they are demonstrating any more. The volume ends with the century in the grip of World War Three. In the year 1997, Martha dies on a contaminated island off the northwest coast of Scotland. Most of the people of Britain have died before her, in 1978, of multiple afflictions: bubonic plague, nerve gases, nuclear explosions. The whole story closes with Martha's death in destroyed world at the end of the twentieth century, so the theme of the nuclear catastrophe threatening the world is obviously the same as in *The Golden Book*.

In coming to London, Martha tries to understand the origins of the sickness of South African society she comes from. As a visitor from colony, she stands explicitly on the margins, observing the 'centre' of that civilization which is London, that gave birth to her own. The narrative achieves a more obvious critical distance. Free to cross the boundaries between the East and West of London, Martha is alert not only to the misery of post-war Britain, in both richer and poorer, and to the dampness which contrasts so strongly with the dry continent she has just left. The early chapters of the novel explore the ideology of a country absorbed in myth, contradictory myths of a society that is classless and yet on the verge of revolution. One of Martha's friends who belongs to the middle class, Henry Matheson, talks about this classless society in the language of class-consciousness: attempting to describe a girl in his office without explicitly referring to her social status, he uses phrases like 'She was *only* …, her father was *under* me during the war, a very *good type* of man… you really can hardly tell her from …' all implying a rigid social stratification[2]. And this is what Martha rejects just like she rejects the possibility of working in Henry's office. Subconsciously, she foresees the impossibility of making compatible so many things that do not match in the society of post-war Britain she lives in.

Whereas the boundaries that existed in Southern Africa were clearly visible – white and non-white - the social boundaries of the society Martha encounters in London are more hard to overcome because they are invisible. The ugliness of the situation is illuminated by Martha, who sees both classes as 'savages'[3]. As an outsider she is vulnerable, unprotected in either world unless she is prepared to become one of them.

When Martha moves into the bizarre household of Mark Coldridge, a wealthy writer, the situation changes dramatically. Although Martha remains an outsider in the family where she is supposed to be a secretary of a writer Mark Coldridge, she is in a position to 'diagnose' the condition of family life here. But the Coldridges cannot be called an average family. Martha's services are required because Mark's wife, Lynda is mentally ill and is unable to look after their son, Francis, who has thus never known any normal mother-child relationship. When Mark's scientist brother runs to Russia, and his wife Sarah, a Jewish refugee, kills herself, another child is added to this family group. Paul, like Francis, is one of new generation of 'children of violence', deprived of normal childhood experience and therefore unable to form 'normal' family relationships. These children are symbolic of a whole damaged generation, a symptom of the sickness in the centre of the Empire. So in *The Four-Gated City*, socialist politics and communal life are given even sharper critique than in *The Golden Notebook*. The pointlessness of politics is disclosed through the futile figure of Phoebe Coldridge, whose lifetime of work on behalf of the Labour Party proves fruitless, and the importance of community is singled by the dissolution of the Coldridge household.

Because Doris Lessing's social analysis is so convincing in its detail, the reader is drawn unsuspectingly towards the point at which the novel takes off into prophesy. A society in which nothing works properly, in which young people are disillusioned with politics and turn either to violence or alternative societies, in which the needs of industry override everything else, the society of the 1960s – is a vision to which the contemporary reader's experience gives ready assent. It does not require a great leap of the imagination to follow through from this scenario to the nuclear accident with which the novel ends. The ground is prepared when Mark covers his study walls and ceiling with newspaper cuttings, maps and other evidence of the gradual breakdown and growing insanity of society, evidence also of the links between these apparently disparate items. Whatever takes in the realm of local or world politics, Mark here charts what is really happening, opposing his vision of 'reality' to the myths created by those in power, and sustained by those who cannot bear to face up the truth. Here is the route map indicating the path to destruction in very precise detail, giving time, date and place, providing statistics and fact such as realistic novel has always relied upon to create its sense of verisimilitude. The novel's prophetic ending, however non-realist in the conventional sense, follows the inner logic of he text, and grows out of these guarantees of authenticity.

---

[2] FGC, p. 39.

[3] FGC, p. 41.

However, the novel moves even further in the direction of science-fiction in the 'Appendix', which focuses on the mutants born after the accident. Some of them display telepathic powers, highly developed forms of faculties of which Martha had been fleetingly aware during her visionary experiences. She describes these children as 'our guardians': it is as if they have lived through, survived and absorbed all the violence and horror of which man is capable, and emerged with a 'gentle, strong authority'[4]. One of them, Joseph, tells Martha that one day the whole human race will be like him, an advanced revolutionary form replacing all previous inadequate models. This vision of a post-apocalyptic new Eden clearly belongs to the realm of myth, and it is hard to avoid feeling that here is slight suggestion that a nuclear accident might, in the long run, be beneficial. But the novel does not end on this optimistic, and to many readers whimsical, note. When Joseph is sent to Nairobi, to a rehabilitation settlement, he is classed as subnormal, 'fit for third grade work'[5]. Mark comments that 'the human race is united a last', but 'all busily looking into each other's faces for marks of *difference*'. As Greene rightly states, the challenging implication here is that violence, instead of being irrational, is a product of man's *reason*. For Western humanists, reason is the measure of all things: what is 'unreasonable' or 'irrational' is by definition undesirable, wrong-headed. However such a belief rests on a divisive system of thought which attributes value to one thing only at the expense of something else, repeatedly turning difference into opposition and conflict. Apparently innocent, value-free contrasts like big/small, light/dark, man/woman, white/black, all too easily lead to ideologically loaded parings like major/minor, good/evil, masculine/feminine, Aryan/ non-Aryan, white/ non-white. Violence in this novel is seen as a consequence of man's obsessive use of 'reason' to differentiate and divide, whether racially, sexually. Politically or physically. The challenge to rationalism is more explicit than ever before in Lessing's writing[6].

---

[4] FGC, p. 662.

[5] FGC, p. 664.

This prophetic shift in Lessing can be seen as the result of the influence of Sufism, a form of Islamic mysticism which provides a kind of answer to that splitting of the self which by many critics is seen as central to Lessing's presentation of her protagonists. The Sufis claim that ordinary people are capable of experiencing a higher working of the mind, transcending ordinary limitations, through which humanity can proceed to a higher level of evolution. Because enlightenment is to be achieved by working with the material world, Sufism aims to reconcile the spiritual and the practical, the irrational and the rational, the unconscious and the conscious. It thus offers the possibility of a unified self, and restores visionary experiences like Martha's to a valued and integrated role in life. In middle age, therefore, Martha is able to look back over her past and see her various selves as mere variations on her 'real' self, her permanent self, to use a Sufi term. Martha's awareness of her own permanent self remains elusive, but she comes closer to realizing it once she recognizes its basis in her childhood self. On her arrival in London, those early experiences of heightened awareness return, so she sees herself in "the lit space (…) her mind was a soft dark empty space. That was what she was (…), a soft dark receptive intelligence"[7] .

To develop this sort of intelligence Martha should go beyond ordinary experience, as she learns through her developing relationship with Lynda. The two women use their dreams and fantasies as a first stage, as 'maps' to the territory that lies outside normal experience. Going through this 'door' makes the "machinery of ordinary life" seem absurd and a trap[8], a feeling Martha remembers from childhood, but had forgotten, as she finds she has forgotten so many experiences and early intimations of telepathic power: "like any neglected faculty, it fell into disuse, it atrophied"[9]. Like other mystical texts, the novel reverses the usual associations of sleeping and waking: Martha and those around her have to struggle repeatedly to recall what their waking selves, education and society reject as nonsense. The achievement of a sense of unity with the natural world, the sense of seeing life again properly is moreover a mixed blessing since it brings with it a sense of the ugliness of 'normal' people, and a sense of alienation from them.

---

[6] G. Greene, *Doris Lessing: the Poetics of Change* Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 256.

[7] FGC, p. 48.

[8] FGC, p. 508.

[9] FGC, p. 525.

Although Martha achieves enlightenment through a kind of mental breakdown, to which she deliberately submits herself alone in an empty flat, and with Lynda in her basement 'hell', this does not signify a rejection of reason in itself, only of an over-reliance on rationalism to the exclusion of all other philosophies. In order to learn from and survive these very frightening experiences, Martha needs every ounce of her analytical experiences. Detachment is necessary for self-analysis as much as for social analysis. Martha's ultimate aim is not to live in a mystic, or mental asylum, but to return to everyday life. The activity of the Sufi connects and balances all areas of experience – understanding, being and knowing: "This is the Work. Start with yourself, end with all". Sufism is 'not contemptuous of the world – 'be in the world, but of it"[10]. So Martha's search for her real individuality can also be perceived as her search for a world that is without boundaries of conformist sex roles, political affiliations, nor racial and class status.

When Martha arrives in London, she is reminded of her role as an outsider or an intruder, no matter in the small café, which allowed Martha to settle down, the expensive restaurant that she was invited to by her rich friend or on the streets that she wandered around. The first scenes of the novel *The Four-Gated City* abound of the grim images of suffocation and stagnation. These "inside images" seem to represent the sense of "enclosure" and the feeling of a closed society[11]. Martha feels anxious in her relationship with people and is unwilling to be confined in any place or relationship that she is unable to represent or inhabit what she feels is her true self. We cannot but agree with Barbara Rigney who rightly argues that the clinical symptoms of schizophrenia correspond to those of Lessing's heroine: an alienation from the self, which leads to an alienation from other people as well[12]. Wandering through London, Martha has the chance to look for her real self, existing beyond the social mask, and "experiments with the possibilities of surrendering identity, of obscuring the distinction between the self and the non-self … in the more easily controlled area of her own mind"[13]. Under the "protection" of Mrs. Van's coat, Martha plays different roles in various situations until the division between her ‘self’ and ‘not self’ becomes blurred. She names herself differently with each different person. Martha calls “strange identities into being with a switch of clothes or a change of voice – until one felt like an empty space without boundaries”[14]. According to R.D. Laing, and concerning the case from the existential perspective, “psychosis is viewed as a consequence of a lack of congruity between self and others. When Martha tries to live out the “truth” of her ‘existential position”, to claim her real situation, which is not accepted by common sense, she has to pay the price of being mad[15]. Walking through London, she seems to experience herself crossing visible and invisible “boundaries”[16]. The moving river which crosses the city brings Martha a sense of connecting to the city, and her sense of connecting to herself. When Martha looks down the river, she remembers ‘what she had been before she had ‘left home’ to come ‘home’. This is the way she sees her positioning the world:

---

[10] G. Greene, opus cit. , p. 150.

[11] Frederick R. Karl, "Doris Lessing In the sixties: The New Anatomy of melancholy", *Modern Critical Views Doris Lessing*, Ed. Harold Bloom, New York 1986, p. 87.

[12] B. Rigney, "Hysteria as Sanity in *The Four-Gated City*", *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Bronte, Woolf, Lessing and Atwood*, London 1978, p. 70.

[13] B. Rigney, opus cit., p. 129.

> She was able to see herself as if from a hundred yards up, a colored blob, among other blobs, on top of a bus, or in a street (…) a tiny entity among swarms: then down, back insides herself, to stand, arms on damp concrete: this was what she was, a taste or flavor of existence without a name[17].

Martha’s self seeks by “being unembodied to transcend the world and hence to be safe”[18]. By doing so, she “could move back in time, annulling time”, and she could be the real self who is beyond everyone’s expectation and who is not influenced by the society. She suddenly sees herself as Martha Quest:

> … a young girl sitting under the tree where she could see a great hot landscape and a sky full of birds and clouds. But really, not in imagination – there she was… *she was*, nothing to do with Martha, or any other name she might have had attached to her, nothing to do with what she looked like, how she had been shaped[19].

According to Laing’s theory, the self “preoccupied with the figures of fantasies, thought, memories, etc.”, cannot commit to a creative relationship with another because of its isolation and detachment[20]. Martha also has no substantial feeling towards her own body and it may be considered as part of her alienated feeling towards the outer world. As Cederstrom mentions, “Martha attempts to find herself through sexual relationship for she still feels that she needs a man to “bring herself to life”[21]. Martha’s exploration of her body is more like her search for a new way to communicate with the world as well as the whole of her experience shown in the novel is the portrayal of the possibilities and different ways of being and knowing oneself. Martha rightfully feels herself as a receptor (“recording instrument”) for other characters’ personas as she struggles to decide exactly what she is and what is her place in the world. She used to be a “communist”, but gets disappointed in the leftist ideas and sees the hypocrisy of communist leaders both in Britain and abroad. What is left for Martha at the point when we see her as a middle-aged woman in London of the mid 50s, is the revision of her ravaged past: a rebellious childhood and teenage years, a failed marriage, a dead second husband, a lost daughter. This personal past corresponds to the past of the nations Martha belongs to – those of South Africa and Britain. Just like the nations Martha herself is without clear identity or direction. As she meets people she feels herself drifting into new ways of being – she tries to become an integral part of the house of Coldridges and gets involved in the destinies of every member of the community she belongs to, sometimes only temporary, but she also often returns to her old persona of “Matty”, who she created as an act of survival, and then acquires the point of view of a rebellious young girl of her childhood; at another point she is Phyllis Jones, or the “Watcher”, or an anonymous body used for sex or a corporeal “machine”. When Martha finally settles in the house of Coldridges, the house seems to hold her hostage and penetrates the whole of her being while revealing the ways of being and thinking of so many other people. Martha becomes attached to Lynda from her early days of staying in the house. Lynda, Mark’s estranged wife who lives alternately in asylums and in the basement of the house, may be seen as the alter-ego of Martha: Lynda is the “madwoman in the basement” which is at the bottom - not the top – of the household hierarchy. She represents the foundation, the stability of the family, but in a weird way. Although Lynda is incapable of being a proper mother to her son Frances, and a proper wife to her husband Mark, and even seems to desire her bouts of insanity, she is in fact the ‘glue’ that holds the family symbolizing the embodied ‘self’ of it. Lynda’s madness is the only functional thing in the novel, and Martha readily adopts it to find the way out of her own psychological imprisonment. The episodes with Lynda's madness and Martha's attachment to the woman may serve as a commentary on how madness is understood and defined; it also reflects the stifling nature of scientific method and how the medical profession can serve to promote conformity.

---

[14] FGC, p. 30.

[15] R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self : An Existential Study In Sanity and Madness*, London 1969, p. 39.

[16] FGC, p. 48.

[17] FGC, p. 29.

[18] R.D. Laing, opus cit., p. 84.

[19] FGC, p. 52.

---

[20] R.D. Laing, opus cit., p. 80.

[21] L. Cederstrom, *Fine-Turning the Feminine Psyche: Jungian Patterns in the Novels of Doris Lessing*, New York 1990, p. 93.

In a sense, the method by which Lessing images possibility in *The Four-Gated City* is disconcertingly literal-minded. The future – that is, a chronological period situated after the time of writing – is precisely what is represented, and it does not "pour in" so much as constitute a rather traditional conclusion, which fulfills and to an extent explains the premonitions of catastrophe and transformation informing earlier parts of the story. In his novel Lessing seems to be turning her back on the perception that new experiences require new forms of narration: there are no containing or overlapping frames in *The Four-Gated City*, no ambiguities arising from the testimony of multiple narrators, no grounds for confusion over which version of the story is the "correct" one. In fact, the structure of this novel is emphatically traditional. The third-person narrator relating all of he events but those of the appendix is omniscient, and advances frequent observations on matters of at least global importance. Apart from several flashbacks, the narrative is linear, a straightforward march through a selection of contemporary history taken in chronological order. As for Appendix, which is a standard device of the nineteenth-century novel, it ties up loose ends by presenting without comment, in the purest tradition of realism, a group of documents.

In conclusion we may state that *The Four-Gated City* is a novel about ways of being and knowing oneself in which the exploration of Martha Quest's psychology is intricately bound to a complex critique of the political climate in postwar Britain. The story of Martha Quest encompasses decades chronicling the heroine's struggle to find her role as an ex-Communist, woman, daughter, lover, survivor. Doris Lessing has remarkable insight into group dynamics blended with individual traumas in the aftermath of World War II. According to the writer, the ideal of the four-gated city is not to be achieved through changed social organizations. The metaphor of four-gated city retains significance at the end of the sequence representing the lost unity of individual and environment. The main attributes of this perfect city are freedom and order, which are evidently incompatible within the binary system of logic to which the western society is accustomed. The novel therefore appears to advocate the Sufi view that we must change the inner consciousness before society, shifting away from Marxist view that social and economic change must come first. Moreover, the novel seems to suggest that any positive social changes are simply not possible.

Though Lessing's apocalyptic vision of the future at the end of the book has not come to fruition, it serves as a warning to avoid the patterns of human folly. These include political positioning, and Leftism and Communism are used as examples throughout the book. For Lessing, the way to avoid war is the dangerous act of turning inward and acknowledging madness within us all. When Martha faces her true self in a nightmarish sequence of events, she understands how two World Wars and the Holocaust can happen. The author seems to be conveying the message that all evil acts are born out of us not being truly self-aware.

Резюме

Анализ внутреннего мира героини и общественной ситуации в романе Дорис Лессинг *Город четырех ворот*

Статья посвящена последнему, пятому роману из серии романов Дорис Лессинг о Марте Квест под общим названием *Дети насилия* (1952-69). Роман *Город четырех ворот* это как роман о способах бытия и познания собственного внутреннего мира в тесном переплетении с анализом общественно-политической ситуации в Великобритании в 50-х годах XX века. Согласно концепции писательницы, идеал воображаемого города четырех ворот практически недостижим, а путь внутреннего совершенствования личности и самопознания является единственным возможным способом избежать общественных катастроф и приблизиться к гармонии в общественных отношениях.