

# A CONDITIONED WINGS OF FREEDOM

(Martha's character from the novel 'Martha Quest' written by Doris Lessing)

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**Abstract** - Doris Lessing's second novel, Martha Quest, the first of a five volume sequence collectively called as Children of Violence draws its material from Lessing's experience of the white settler's society in Africa which is rigidly controlled by prejudice and conventions. This serial Bildungsroman traces the journey of Martha Quest, a British girl, from her childhood in Rhodesia through Post-war London to an apocalyptic ending in the future. The problems which Martha faces in the mid-twentieth century—sexual, psychological and political are dispassionately treated and explained by Lessing. Martha is a girl with independent spirit and wants retaliate on the existing norms laid by the society. She wants to be recognized as an individual in her own right. To attain individuality and independence, Martha rejects this feminine mystique which glorifies only the physical beauty and utility of women. She doesn't want to be applauded with the hypocrisy chief sentiment. She rejects her mother's suggestion to uphold the traditional values and remain properly married. She revolts against parental authority and frees herself from the fold of marriage by seeking a divorce in search of her own identity and self. Martha knows that identity and self assertion can alone make her life more meaningful and she carves out her own identity as an individual.

**Keywords** : emotional., individual, psychological, reared, self, traditions,

## I. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing is the name to be reckoned within the history of post war English fiction. Described as the most *fearless women novelist in the world, unabashed ex-communist and uncompromising feminist*, Lessing holds a unique place among twentieth century women writer for the sheer number, variety and scope of her work. In her nearly three dozen books, Lessing has experimented with various genres—ranging from social realism to science fiction with brief forays into philosophy and mysticism— and offered a perceptive, through critical, commentary on the socio-political as well as cultural scenario in the post-1950's world.

The novel Martha Quest traces in chronological fashion the developing consciousness of a young protagonist who passes from girlhood to womanhood on a farm in Rhodesia. Mrs. Quest is shaping Martha strictly according to English traditions and putting many *don'ts* in her dress and make up. She does not like that Martha should meet men, especially Jewish shop-keepers – the Cohen boys- for several reasons. Martha not only defies her mother's wish of remaining aloof from the Cohen boys, but on the contrary becomes more friendly with them and frankly tells her mother one day:

*"I want to see the Cohen boys" 'you're making friends with them? Demurred Mrs Quest 'I thought we always were friends with them', said Martha scornfully(MQ:46)*

One of the most important factors which affect Martha is her own family and upbringing. As Holmquist points out, it is Martha's family who brings her in touch both with bourgeois demand on women and with conflict-ridden relationship between parents and children and men and women. The institution of the family upholds all these social structures, and through her parents Martha learns the rules of society.

The background of the Quest family is important when we consider the basis of Martha's life. The parents are representatives of the white British middle class, and they have come to the British colony in the Central Africa with great expectations that they would soon become rich on maize-growing. They live on a small farm, and their house is built as a temporary affair, because after they have become rich they would go back to England or move into town. Even though this has not happened the parents still continue to dream about a richer future. This irritates Martha; in her opinion her parents are only deluding themselves, but at the same time she is confused because she senses how in point of fact she is influenced by her parents' way of thinking:

...this cold, exasperated thought had never been worked out, and she still shared her parents' unconscious attitude, although she repudiated their day dreaming and foolishness, that this was not really her home. (MQ:15)

The conflict between Martha and her parents is evident from the beginning of the series of *Children of Violence*. Both parents have an important role in Martha's life, but most strongly she is influenced by her mother.

Martha is very articulate in pronouncing her choices. (As compared to) She expresses her likes and dislikes boldly in a more defiant manner. Mrs Quest wants that her daughter should not go alone on the streets as she is afraid of the black natives who often rape white girls. But here also Martha opposes her mother and announces:

"If I don't get a lift, I'll walk" which of course was absurd, infringing one of the taboos- 'a young white girl walking alone', etc. (MQ:46)

Thus, in psychoanalytic theory, one of the measures of a mother's goodness or badness is whether mother and child's interests are identical. *Mothering is an extraordinary condition which is almost like an illness. Analysts suggest that women get gratification in fulfilling maternal role expectations at the fundamental level of experience from that of any other human relationship. Mothering requires and elicits relation capacities that are unique* (Winnicott:85).

Martha Quest, in fact is an idealist in revolt against the snobbery of her parents. She tries to live life to the full with every nerve, emotion and instinct bared to experience. In a patriarchal society, the birth of a female child is traditionally less welcome than that of the male. This attitude prevails even in white society of British colonies like Rhodesia. Martha also becomes aware of how gender discrimination is practiced in her family while her younger brother with *half her brains* was put in an *expensive school, like a visitor from a more prosperous world*, she was studying in a local school. The awareness of the biased attitude makes her self-reliant and defiant towards her parents and she decides to seek her own identity outside the parental hold.

Despite several restrictions, Martha finally rebels against her parents. One day standing before the mirror, she took a pair of scissors and severed the bodice from the shirt of her dress. She was trying to make the folds like Marnie's when the door suddenly opened, and her father came in. Looking at Martha, he remarked: *Your mother won't like you cutting her dresses to pieces* (MQ:23) She said defiantly: *Daddy, why should I wear dresses like a kid of ten?* (23) And when her mother enters the scene, She argues:

"I'm sixteen," said Martha, between set teeth, in a stifled voice,.... "My dear, nice girls don't wear clothes like this

until..." "I'm not a nice girl," broke in Martha, and suddenly burst into laughter (21)

Since financial independence is necessary to seek security and liberation, Martha puts in all her efforts to take up some job without letting her parents know about her plans. Finally she gets a job in the town, with the help of her Jewish friend Joss Cohen, informs her parents about her achievements only after getting it. When Joss writes her about the vacancy in his uncle's firm, "*She felt as if a phase of her life has ended, and that now a new one should begin;... With Joss's letter in her hand, she walked onto the veranda, and informed her parents, in a hasty way, that she was taking a job in town; and she hardly heard their startled queries. It all seemed so easy now. 'But you can't expect me to stay here for the rest of my life!'*" (MQ:90-91)

As is expected of a girl like Martha, bold and defiant, decides to marry a man of her own choice. She chooses a civil servant and informs her parents about the marriage ten days before the ceremony: "*She then sat down and wrote to her parents that she was marrying 'a man in the civil service', that they would be married in ten days, and she would bring him out to the farm 'for inspection' the following weekend*". (291).

While in *Lessings The Grass Is Singing* each of Mary Turner's acts further reduces her freedom, in *Martha Quest* the protagonist slowly enlarges her consciousness through her greater capacity for introspection and self-reflection. She watches *the movements of her own mind as if she is observing a machine*. However, for much of her adolescent and young adult life Martha struggles with some of the same ambivalent psychic tendencies that finally destroy Mary Turner: passive compliance accompanied by repressed hostility. Later her hesitant and then increasingly open rebellion against the confining social structures of her world enables her to direct herself away from a psychic determinism and toward free choice and emotional stability. In *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*, Lessing takes her protagonist through the rites of passage of adolescence and young adulthood: social, intellectual, and sexual initiations; marriage, first child, and dissolution of her marriage. The landmarks of Martha's early experiences and gradual development of consciousness are deliberately representative, even archetypal, ones, such as her awareness of herself playing the *young girl* role for her elders; or her recognition, as she departs for a first date, that, "*moving inescapably through an ancient role, she must leave her parents who destroyed her*". (80) Martha's mother, May Quest-the epitome of all the conventional attitudes towards politics, social behaviour, sexuality and experience from which Martha must extricate herself-appears through her daughter's eye as *the eternal mother, holding sleep and death in her twin hand like a sweet and poisonous cloud of forgetfulness-that was how Martha saw her, like a baneful figure in the nightmare in which she herself was caught*. (34)

In Martha's case, the father will be shown to be a remote figure, and Martha experiences confusion because she feels that the mother stands between her and her father: Mrs. Quest has the power in the family, and the clashes between her and Martha push 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.

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 to their daughters. (Chodorow :166-167) This is also the case in Mrs. Quest relationship to Martha: Mrs. Quest continually reminds Martha that her brother is the kind of the child that pleases her, and it will be shown that the fact that Mrs. Quest would prefer Martha to be a boy fundamentally affects their whole relationship as well as Martha's own development.

From these ritualistic stages Martha moves through further specific experiences that shape her character and personality : her introduction to the social life of the town through the sport club and sundowners' parties; her exposure to socialist thought through her friends Joss and Solly Cohen and the Left Book club; her courtship with a latent homosexual named Donovan; and her sexual initiation with an earnest young man named Adolph whom she doesn't love. In each circumstance she observes not only the new people and events as they enter her experience but also her own reactions to them. As Martha moves to the town by herself, she consciously bidding farewell to her mother's ideals as well as to her childhood. She starts working in the office of a firm of lawyers and rents a room. Martha regards herself to be a new person, one who is able to be quite different from her mother. However, as Martha's life in town begins, her needs are extremely conventional: Knapp describes this phase of Martha's life as an *integration into mindless social life and the dubious thrills of dating* (Knapp:38).

Ever since her childhood Martha has experienced maneuvering from her mother's side, and when the same pattern recurs with Donovan, herself defenses react strongly against it. Just like leaving her home and her mother, Martha leaves Donovan, and is willing to see only the future: she does not consider herself to gain anything by looking at her past. Breaking away from people becomes a pattern she uses throughout her life, and at the same time she runs away from her problems.

In the festive atmosphere of the Sports Club Martha plunges into short relationships with young men she is not actually at all interested in. One of these men is Adolph King, a Jewish musician who is bitterly conscious of his pariah status, and who sees Martha as a means to improve his status. The image of Mrs. Quest follows Martha also in this relationship: Martha is very much aware of the

stigmatization of Jews because it is the favourite object of her mother's invectives. Martha is motivated by the need to show both the Sports Club people and her mother, that she is not bound by their conventions. (Knapp:40-41). By having a sexual relationship with a Jewish man Martha finds new way altogether of opposing her mother, and it is also a way for Martha to make herself feel different and unique, *the act of love and claimed from them (the Sports Club people), and she now belonged to this man* (MQ:185).

Martha's need to rebel against the conventions of her mother and the Sports Club people overrides the resentment at *having her first love affair with a man she was not the slightest in love with* (MQ:185). Martha tries to persuade herself that she loves Adolph and that he is in every way superior to the Sports Club men, and she succeeds to assure herself of this for some time. She even ask Adolph at one point why they shouldn't get married. However, their relationship ends with Martha's friends from the Sports Club intervene: they tell Martha that Adolph has been boasting everywhere about having a girlfriend like Martha, and they end the relationship for Martha. Martha is embarrassed because of this *but at the back of her mind was a profound thankfulness that it was all over* (MQ:195).

This phase shows again how immature and reactionary Martha is. She thinks that a relationship with a Jewish man would make her rebellion and independent, but in reality it only leave her in the mercy of her friends, who have to rescue her from the *big bad wolf*. She is embarrassed when her friends and her relationship with Adolph, but she is also relieved that they have made the a decision for her. Martha is clearly not ready to carry the consequences of her behaviour herself; on the contrary, she is very dependent on other peoples' opinions, and unable to analyze her motives. At this point she is only looking for a man through whom she could fulfil herself, and this is a kind of phenomenon Gardiner mentions in her writing on female identity: for a female protagonist it is often an aspiration to concentrate on her inner life and feelings, and through a relationship to a man seeks an inner balance.

Making Martha a more introspective character than Mary Turner, Lessing presents the development of her awareness is considerably more detail, and primarily through the girl's own reflections. Martha has derived a sense of self from literature, she sees herself through literature (MQ:7) Her actual experiences are supplemented by what she calls *that other journey of discovery, reading. She read like a bird collecting twigs for a nest. She picked up each new book, using the author's name as a sanction, as if the book were something separate and self-contained, a world in itself. And as she read she asked herself, what has this got to do with me?* (MQ:210) The world disclosed to her through books provides a crucial source of values against which she can measure those of her immediate milieu.



Despite her desire to gain rational control over the direction of her life, Martha's actions are rarely deliberate and consistent. More often, they emerge out of her own self-division and her efforts to discover her truest self in the Welter of competing feelings and needs. Subject to the emotional vicissitudes typical of adolescence (and later), she often feels as if *half a dozen entirely different people inhabited her body, and they violently disliked each other, bound together by only one thing, a strong pulse of longing; anonymous, impersonal, formless, like water*(MQ:153).

Such self-division is incipient from Martha Quest very birth conceived (like the author herself) during world war I – the manifestation of cultural breakdown in its most massive dimension – by parents *both having severe nervous breakdowns, due to the Great Unmentionable* (Martha's father's auphenism for the war), Martha has known from childhood that *she was unwanted in the first place, and that she had a double nervous break-down for godparents.*(249) Already alert to the ubiquitous divisions of her world by the age of fifteen, when the first novel of the series opens, she acknowledges that *the effort of imagination needed to destroy the words black, white, nation, race, exhausted her...*(MQ:57) Later that sense of categorisation is understood as a construct not exclusively of the external world or of Martha's perception of it but of consciousness itself. Unlike Mary Turner's pathological self-division, however, Martha's is more nearly a critical regulator through which she gradually reduces the disparity between what others expect of her and what she really feels. Frequently her choices and decisions are negative ones, acquiescence's arising out of a desire not to do something else. Her marriage at nineteen to Douglas known well is typical of the way in which her rebellion against one set of values forces her to re-define herself in the context of another, often equally mistaken, set – a judgement which she is only later able to make.

Between two poles of the real and the ideal, Martha Quest's consciousness slowly develops, breaking out of succession of enclosures. Her first real break from her family home propels her to the nearest town, where she lives in a small impersonal room and pursues a secretarial course at the local polytechnic; her employer at a law office sends her there because he recognizes her intelligence but does not know how to utilise it, since she is female. Seeing no clear future for herself in the town as a single woman in a job which does not challenge her or fulfill her imagined possibilities for herself, she passively accepts the role of wife—having first slept with Adolph and then Douglas Knowell in defiance of her parents' Victorian sexual attitudes. Ironically she is most her mother's daughter when she rebels against her, for her rejection of the values of her parents' generation merely traps her in a repetition of the very kind of marriage from which she had hoped to escape. As Martha's marriage to Douglas approaches, Lessing metaphorically suggests the exchange of the one enclosure

for another: *It was odd that Martha, who thought of the wedding ceremony as an unimportant formula that must be gone through for the sake of society, was also thinking of it as the door which would enclose Douglas and herself safely within romantic love.... She thought of the marriage as a door closing firmly against her life in town, which she was already regarding with puzzled loathing* (MQ:237-38).

Though Martha has never felt lonely in the veld before, when she reaches it this time, her anxiety extends outward into the physical world, transforming it into the correlative of her inner state;

*She was now feeling lost and afraid. She was vividly conscious of the night outside, the vast teeming night, which was so strong, and seemed to be beating down into the room, through the low shelter of the thatch, through the frail mud walls. It was as if the house itself, formed of the stuff and substance of the veld, had turned enemy...*(MQ:245)

In that moment Martha is most like her fictional predecessor, Mary Turner (*The Grass is Singing*) whose anxieties transform her house and the bush into the external forms of her own inner enemy. However, while Mary's abnormal consciousness becomes radically fragmented and ultimately psychotic, Martha's self-division gradually moves unity and even into visionary capacities.

The dissolution of the subject/object dichotomy between self and world, inner and outer, becomes the deepest expression of the unconventional consciousness in Lessing's fiction. The integrating mystical vision that Martha Quest experiences in brief glimpses, and the disintegrating, psychotic vision that overwhelms Mary Turner, represent its complementary manifestations, each of which ramifies further in Lessing's subsequent novels. One further form of the dissolution of the boundaries of the self is the temporary merging with another that occurs in ecstatic sexual union—an event that Lessing's female protagonists rarely experience; the moment of union is more often a psychological than a physical event for her characters. Martha Quest's first sexual experience with Adolph, for example, is disappointing both physically and emotionally.

Despite Martha's occasional illuminations, the general progress of her emotional, sexual and social education in the early volumes of Children of Violence is more often along the path of self-division. Her anxiety and ambivalence over her imminent marriage to Douglas Knowell near the end of *Martha Quest*, for example, typify her inability to distinguish clearly which of her many selves is her true center. *She need not marry him; at the same time, she knew quite well she would marry him; she could not help it...she also heard a voice remarking calmly within her that she would not stay married to him...*(MQ.253)

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