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A Young Girl Reading: Martha's Quest through Literature and Realism in Martha Quest

Abstract

This paper examines the young heroine's ambivalent relationship with books in Doris Lessing's coming-of-age novel Martha Quest. Martha, a young British girl growing up in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the wake of World War II, is a voracious young reader who reads extensively in order to make sense of the world in which she is living. Sometimes the books she reads lead her to think critically and challenge the canonical authorities and patriarchal society; however, at times her reading experience is also unsettling and frustrating because the books she reads are mostly produced within a biased system she intends to go beyond. The paper analyzes how Martha relies on books to reshape her national identity and personal life, and how she deals with the discrepancy between the world represented in books and reality in terms of Benedict Anderson's concept of an 'imagined community'. Furthermore, this paper also discusses how Martha's portrait as a bewildered reader of realist literature mirrors Lessing's own ambiguous relationship with her realist narratives.

Keywords: Martha Quest, realism, imagined community, readers, identity

Nobel laureate Doris Lessing's Children of Violence is a series of five novels which chronicle the life of a female protagonist named Martha Quest. The first novel of the series, Martha Quest (1952), focuses on the heroine's life as a white teenage girl in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe) in the 1930s. Martha Quest has been unjustly overlooked by literary critics in recent decades, unlike its subsequent novels: A Proper Marriage (1954), A Ripple from

the Storm (1958), Landlocked (1965) and The Four-Gated City (1969).[1] One of the goals of this paper is to reassess the significance of this coming-of-age novel by analyzing the young protagonist's use of books to redefine her identity and guide her through a world that she frequently fails to understand, with complicated issues of race, gender and nationality. As a young girl who has been "formed by literature," (Lessing, Martha Quest 215), the books Martha reads tend to teach her to challenge the canonical authorities and break through the deep-rooted biases in patriarchal society; however, her reading experience is sometimes frustrating and counterproductive because those books she relies on are still products of a preexisting system from which she intends to escape. This paper aims to explore how Martha is guided and lost in her reading of words and the world in terms of Benedict Anderson's concept of an 'imagined community'. This paper also aims to discuss how Martha's portrait as a perplexed reader of realist literature reflects on Lessing's own ambivalent relationship with realist narrative in her writings.

The Children of Violence series narrates the growth of consciousness of Martha Quest and reflects on Lessing's political and social concerns during her personal experiences in South Africa. Lessing makes clear that her Children of Violence series is written as "a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective" ("The Small Personal Voice" 14). Like her protagonist, Lessing's family moved from Iran to the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, so she shares a similar background with her character Martha. As a British girl who finds it difficult to identify with her society, nation or motherland, Martha struggles to make sense of her connection with the world. Here Benedict Anderson's concept of an 'imagined community' should facilitate our study of how a young mind imagines and situates herself in the society in which she lives. In his Imagined Communities, Anderson claims that nationality, nation-ness and nationalism are all "cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (4). Anderson describes such communities as imagined precisely because while most of their members are unknown to one another, each believes that they all share some deep, trans-historical bond. One way to form and sustain imagined communities is the consumption of newspapers. Through the mass circulation of newspapers, "each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion." (Anderson, Imagined Communities 35) Moreover, readers tend to affirm their sense of

nationalism and belonging by reading the same printed materials as everyone else: “At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbour, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life.” (Anderson, Imagined Communities 35-36) This process of identification takes place when the readers reaffirm the reality the newspapers help construct as the very reality that one shares with the people around them.

The newspapers also play an important role in Martha’s coming-of-age experience. At a certain point, when Mr. Perr, the chairman of the Left Book Club, asks her what newspapers she is reading, Martha replies that she reads The Observer, and then she is advised to read New Statesman and Nation as a remedy. Later when she reads New Statesman and Nation on her own, she gains “a feeling of warmth, of security” when she discovers that what she used to defend with a sense of guilt is treated as “the merest commonplace” (Lessing, Martha Quest 154).[2] Martha gains a sense of belonging and relief when a community out there, which shares the similar values and beliefs she embraces, seems tangible. Feeling encouraged, she begins to dream that somewhere a utopia exists, which is a “golden city,” “the white-piled, broad-thoroughfared, tree-lined, four-gated dignified city where white and black and brown lived as equals, and there was no hatred or violence.” (Lessing, Martha Quest 155)

Martha is also a critical reader – she does not accept everything mentioned in the newspapers as a fact. Martha learns to doubt the authenticity and disinterestedness of the local newspaper: “The Zambesia News was a disgrace. She said: why didn’t it print the truth about what was happening in Europe?” (Lessing, Martha Quest 273). As a young reader, Martha feels self-assured, confused, angry, and notices the social problems and issues which go unnoticed or are twisted in the media. Newspapers play an irreplaceable role in shaping Martha’s early national and cultural imagination and negotiating a space for herself among different communities composed of the English, Afrikaners, and the Jews.

The newspaper and the novel are two prime examples of Anderson’s ‘print capitalism’, which do not only inform the readers of what national identity might be; rather, they cultivate a way to think about nation and further constitute the nation through a kind of shared imagination. With its frequently entwining multiple plot lines and quasi-omniscient point of view, the novel helps

constitute an imagined unit, “a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time.” (Anderson, Imagined Communities 26) As some characters in the novel might never meet although they nevertheless coexist in a fictional society, this “is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.” (Anderson, Imagined Communities 26) Anderson argues that, rather than merely a form of cultural production, the novel can be an invisible cultural force for imagining the nation: “fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.” (Imagined Communities 36) In other words, novels create a mode of imagined temporality which is essential in forming the consciousness of modern nations.

Anderson’s analysis of this affinity between the novel and nation assumes that the form of the novel would always adequately represent the truth and reality of the nation. In The Spectre of Comparisons, Anderson acknowledges that, while this assumption might be true for the 19th and the early-20th-century novels, in the second half of the 20th century “the affinities [between the novel and nation] have become visibly strained” (335). This is because the unified genre of the novel is breaking down to different subgenres, with their own formal conventions and audiences. In The Modes of Modern Writing, David Lodge notes that writers of realism assume that “there is a common phenomenal world that may be reliably described by the methods of empirical history” (47). However, he also notices a remarkable change in that “to the later writers in the [realist] tradition what this world means is much more problematical” (Lodge 47). The novelists of the 18th and 19th centuries tended to agree on the nature of reality, in which words could be relied on to describe the real world. However, those of the 20th and 21st centuries are well aware of the discrepancy between narrative and reality. They tend to question the authenticity of the reality built by words and believe that what constitutes reality is certainly open to debates.

In his “Anderson and the Novel,” Jonathan Culler points out that while it is far-fetched to argue that novels have the power to shape nations through their representations of nationhood, the novel does have the potential to introduce readers to a space for imagining a community. In Culler’s words, “the novel was a condition of possibility for imagining something like a nation, for imagining a community that could be opposed to another, as friend to foe, and thus a condition of possibility

of a community organized around a political distinction between friend and enemy" (37). Culler's essay points out that the novel has the potential to address readers both as insiders and/or outsiders, because

it addresses readers in a distinctively open way, offering the possibility of adhering to a community, as an insider, without laying down particular criteria that have to be met. If a national community is to come into being, there must be the possibility for large numbers of people to come to feel a part of it, and the novel, in offering the insider's view to those who might have been deemed outsiders, created that possibility. (37)

The novel's possibility to create a sense of belonging easily appeals to an outsider like Martha. As a British citizen living in an African colony, Martha is by birth on the side of the more superior colonizers. However, as a young female, she is frustrated to find that her opportunities and choices are more limited than those of her male counterparts. To this effect, she has to struggle to negotiate a space in at least three different communities: natives, white males (represented by Martha's father), and women with British conventional values (epitomized by her mother). She is frequently confused about her position in different communities and the unsettling experience leads her to become a voracious reader.

As a female reader, Martha's ambivalent attitude toward books shall not come as a surprise. In literary tradition, after all, the woman reader's relationship with books is portrayed to be both empowering and destructive. In Patricia Okker's study of female readership in the 19th century antebellum America, women readers emerge mainly in four stereotypical images: a maternal social servant (at a time when the role of woman was viewed as a moral guardian for the nation); a lady of leisure with class privilege; a domestic idler; or an intellectual bluestocking (at times when cultural climate was hostile to talented women). From a socio-historical point of view, women's reading is tightly bound to their domestic duties as wives and mothers. In A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf's depiction of Judith Shakespeare as an impossible reader without a room of her own shows that reading is in conflict with her domestic tasks:

She was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a

few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. (49)

In her Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction, Catherine J. Golden indicates that in Victorian literary representations the book is a frenemy which empowers women while sometimes also leading them to destruction. On the one hand, the book is a good source for women's education: "regulated and carefully supervised reading was a vital part of woman's education, improving knowledge, confidence, social grace, as well as intellect and imagination." (Golden 21) On the other hand, without proper guidance and careful selection, reading could be poisonous, serving as a means of escapist entertainment, leading to woman's downfall: "a book of romance, sensation fiction, or sentimental fiction could arouse a female's sexual impulses, drain her vital energies, damage her mental and reproductive health, divorce her attention from her maternal and domestic duties, undermine her self-control, and rot her mind, leading to ruination." (Golden 22)

Martha, as a 20th-century young female reader who shares an ambivalent relationship with books, joins her fictional predecessors in the quest of self-discovery through literature. When Martha is introduced to the reader for the very first time, she is reading: "Martha Quest, a girl of fifteen, sat on the steps in full sunshine, clumsily twisting herself to keep the glare from her book with her own shadow." (Lessing, Martha Quest 3) Irritated by the mundane conversation between her mother and Mrs. Van Rensberg, Martha frowns while she is trying to read. This is the impression the reader has of Martha throughout the novel. Martha is wholeheartedly devoted to books because they seem to be the best source of knowledge available to her at the moment, for she is excluded from good education available only to her brother (Lessing, Martha Quest 35). Her family fails to provide her with the education she needs, since Mr. and Mrs. Quest together represent the conventional attitudes toward politics, social behavior, sexuality and experiences, from which Martha must extricate herself. Like many other men crippled in World War I, Martha's father is a man who has lost his heath and the passion for life. He spends a lot of time ruminating about "the war and the illness" (Lessing, Martha Quest 33). Martha frequently finds herself at odds with Mrs. Quest's traditional values and thoughts on sex and propriety. Unable to gain a desirable education

from either school or family, Martha naturally turns to books as guides in her personal and intellectual life.

In her "Sense and Sensibility," Barbara Sicherman notes that reading helps broaden female readers' horizon by offering them more space to imagine and explore new possibilities: "Reading provided space – physical, temporal, and psychological – that permitted women to exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations, whether imposed by formal society or by family obligation." (202) For Martha, reading is an invisible weapon with which she fights against the hegemonic community, represented by her father, and also declares her independence. At a certain point Mr. Quest is talking about World War I with Martha, and unpleasantly accuses Martha of being a "pacifist." In order to defy her father, even though she lacks the true experience and memory of that period of time (since the 1920s were the first decade of her life, which she barely remembers), she still manages to imagine herself among "the group of people in the Twenties who refused to honour the war… through reading" (34; emphasis added). Not unlike Anderson's and Culler's theses, reading, "as a means of asserting herself" (Lessing, Martha Quest 7), allows Martha to identify herself with one group against another, to imagine herself as a member of a certain group sharing similar values and beliefs.

Given that Martha lives without a role model or proper education, books become the only teacher and guide available in the development of her mental maturity and identity. While she suffers from "an agony of adolescent misery" due to the lack of a role model (Lessing, Martha Quest 10), books provide her with a way to look at herself from outside and a means to empower herself, "[f]or if she was often resentfully conscious that she was expected to carry a burden that young people of earlier times knew nothing about, then she was no less conscious that she was developing a weapon which would enable her to carry it" (11). However, this habitual reliance on books often brings Martha more doubts and confusion than relief. She feels uneasy about her own image as represented and constructed from books:

> *from these books Martha had gained a clear picture of herself, from the outside. She was adolescent, and therefore bound to be unhappy; British, and therefore uneasy and defensive; in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and therefore inescapably beset with problems of race*

and class; female, and obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past. (Lessing, Martha Quest 12)

Books educate Martha and endow her with a sense of responsibility, but at the same time she is unhappy in the self-consciousness that she has no ideas how to use the knowledge gained from books. Later in the story, Martha is disgusted with her companions and parties, but she feels bored and wants to participate in the "barren" parties with pleasure (Lessing, Martha Quest 213). When she finds that her feelings correspond to the typical characterization in books, she finds it painful that she knows nothing about what causes her inconsistency:

Even more painful than this cold-minded analysis was the knowledge that it was all so banal; just as the stare from that dispassionate cool eye, which judged herself as adolescent, and therefore inevitably contradictory and dissatisfied, was harder to bear than the condition of adolescence itself. She was, in fact, suffering from the form of moral exhaustion which is caused by seeing a great many facts without knowing the cause for them; by seeing oneself as an isolated person, without origin or destination. (Lessing, Martha Quest 213-14)

Reading turns out to be an incomplete and insufficient education for Lessing's troubled teenage heroine. It does enlighten her at times, but also makes her feel powerless and disoriented. To this effect, Martha is constantly oscillating between passive acceptance of and critical involvement in cultural production.

This situation worsens when the discrepancy between Martha and "those blithe heroes and heroines" becomes hard to ignore (Lessing, Martha Quest 11). When Martha fails to project her future on that of her mother or Mrs. Van Rensberg, her mind tends to turn toward the heroines in the books she reads, but she soon has to discard them because apparently there is a gap between the world in the books and the real world (Lessing, Martha Quest 14). Martha finds her reading experience most unsettling when she attempts to rely on her books to understand national, racial and class differences. She painfully observes the unequal positions of the native and the colonizer in Southern Rhodesia and compares this reality to the world illustrated in books, but books simply fail to provide a satisfying explanation or a viable solution to the current unfair system. At a certain point, when Martha is challenged in public by Mr. Van Rensberg about England's cruelty in the

Boer War and Mr. Quest's refusal to visit the Van Rensbergs, "she [is] being questioned as a representative," while "she [does] not feel herself to be representative." (Lessing, Martha Quest 97) This is an important debate which forces Martha to realize that her knowledge and values built on books lack solid support from her experience. Even though she believes in equal rights for all people, she cannot defend herself against Mr. Van Rensberg's accusations because she cannot see herself as a representative of the English people. After this frustrating confrontation, she "began to read, hungrily, for some kind of balance … what she read seemed remote; or rather, it seemed that through reading she created a self-contained world which had nothing to do with what lay around her" (Lessing, Martha Quest 100).

This sense of alienation in her reading experience becomes tangible, making her further wonder why she fails to connect this self-contained world with the contemporary society she tries to understand. In Martha's imagination, the writers of those books often work in secluded surroundings, in an ivory tower, and are "shut in a firelit study behind drawn curtains," hearing no sound except the movements of their own thoughts (Lessing, Martha Quest 72). What Martha experiences here is similar to Culler's explanation that a reader may be situated inside or outside the self-contained community in the book. Martha sometimes feels she is on the same side as the world in the book but more often she feels excluded.

The reason why Martha lacks the resources to construct an alternative world is because her means of interpreting the world are all provided by the world she intends to get away from. The knowledge she gains from reading leads her to view society critically and enriches her fantasy of a four-gated noble city, an ideal society. However, the means of empowerment unavoidably cause her to feel powerless, for she is ill-equipped to make a significant difference or to come to terms with the disparity she experiences between the world in the book and the world in which she lives. To deal with her confusion and bewilderment, the only guide left to her, again, is books. In this circulation, Martha's intellectual exploration through books is doomed to lead her nowhere. At a certain point in the novel, after seeing a small and ragged black child running behind a donkey and a milk cart, Martha feels sad and perplexed about the world she wants to change. She turns to books to look for a satisfying answer or explanation: "She wanted something which would include that deprived black child … she wanted it all explained. The titles of her book seemed faded, what

the print said had nothing to do with her life." (Lessing, Martha Quest 155-56). All Martha's efforts in her reading, imagining and envisioning seek to understand and change the restrictive society and the color bar she sees every day. But as the novel shows, these efforts are mostly dead-ended and exhausting. She is well aware of her habit of labeling people: "she could not remember a time when she had not thought of people in terms of groups, nations, or colour of skin first, and as people afterwards" (Lessing, Martha Quest 61). In her world, there are

> *the natives, the nameless and swarming; the Afrikaans, whose very name held the racy poetic quality of their rigorous origins; the British, with their innumerable subgroups … held together by the knowledge of ownership. And each group, community, clan, colour, strove and fought away from the other, in a sickness of dissolution (Lessing, Martha Quest 61)*

On the other hand, she takes pains to make an "effort of imagination" in order to "destroy the words 'black,' 'white,' 'nation,' 'race.' Her struggle exhaust[s] her and make[s] her head ache." (Lessing, Martha Quest 61). In other words, Martha is caught up between several imagined communities, sustained by Anderson's 'print capitalism', and she finds nowhere out. Her tendency to categorize people into groups in conflict before knowing these people with their individualities is also problematic because her conceptualization is unwittingly limited by the binary oppositions frequently portrayed in literature. In a similar vein, later Martha confronts a paradox in her imaginary building of an ideal golden city, an antithesis to her actual world: while Martha celebrates the more ordered and harmonious society she dreams about, she also claims that her parents and those whom she finds disqualified will be forbidden to enter this ideal city. From this point of view, it seems that the utopian four-gated city is regrettably built on the same logic of exclusiveness and discrimination as the colonial society she repudiates.

Throughout the novel we see that Martha Quest encounters various kinds of difficulties in attempting to define herself nationally. She struggles to reach an integrity of personality, feeling "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 impulse of longing" (Lessing, Martha Quest 186). The underlying problem of her journey in quest of self is the discrepancy she feels between books and her reality. The books on socialism and economics fail to provide a satisfying solution to the unfair

system she witnesses every day. All these issues bring us to the problematic realism in the books she reads in the formation of her identity.

The narrative voice tells us what happens in Martha's adolescence and relates the conversations in her daily life as well as her inner thoughts and feelings. From time to time, the omniscient narrator reveals to readers important information which Martha does not know. For instance, in the first chapter of Part III, in an ironic and critical tone the narrator gives a detailed account of the establishment of the Sports Club while Martha as a character is entirely absent here. The distance between the protagonist and narrator makes Martha's naivety vulnerable to ironic comments, especially on her unrecognized complicity. As mentioned before, the Children of Violence series is Lessing's attempt to study how the individual situates herself within the collective, and realism seems to be the most suitable form to explore the tension between the individual and society, since realism is centered on a single protagonist and the events unfold in a chronological order. In 1957, during the early stages of her writing career, Lessing glorified the 19th-century literary realism as "the highest point of literature," which shared "a climate of ethical judgment" and values ("The Small Personal Voice" 14). Lessing suggests that it is realism that holds the key that will finally lead to social changes.

Lessing's aim to write about a young female mind's quest for her own identity in the given social and national context as well as Lessing's own belief in literary realism in her early writings anticipate the generic form of the first three volumes of the series. Martha Quest, A Proper Marriage and A Ripple from the Storm were published in close succession and all take a realist form. However, in the course of her writing, Lessing begins to feel that she is caught in the contradiction between the form and the content she wants to work on. As Gayle Greene observes, "the problem she confronts writing Children of Violence is how to use the novel to say something new when the discourses from which the novelist creates are inscribed within the ideologies she repudiates" (36). Sally Robinson contends that in her search of herself Martha must resist a cultural coding that is gendered along the way: "narratives of the selfhood and personal development are culturally coded as male. What Martha must resist, then, is that cultural coding, insofar as it prohibits a woman from being subject of the quest for self" (31). Lessing criticizes hegemonic representation and canonical authorities. However, the ideals of objectivity and

comprehensiveness implied in conventional realism or the omniscient point of view in realism can easily be taken as another authoritative discourse.

Lessing expresses her dissatisfaction toward the narrative mode which reiterates the familiar and assumes that the social reality in which we live is the whole of reality. She confesses that she "could no longer say what [she] wanted to say inside the old form." ("The Small Personal Voice" 65) This literary impasse reaches a limit in A Ripple from the Storm (1958), and Lessing feels an urgent need to seek a narrative breakthrough. Lessing's strategy to turn away from realism makes her interrupt her five-volume series with The Golden Notebook (1962), which fragments the narrative line with multiple points of view, as well as alter the form of the final volumes – the lyrical-mythic Landlocked (1966) and the The Four-Gated City fantasy (1969). These works tend to turn away from realism to fantasy, horror and adventure, to a narrative mode of fragmentation and discontinuity.

With Lessing's work on The Canopus in Argos: Archives Series (1979-83), we find that the writer who used to praise the 19th-century literary realism as the highest form of literature now speaks highly of the genre of space/science fiction. This decision to shift from realism to futuristic fantasy, however, was not an easy one. Before she took up space/science fiction, she experimented with various modifications of her realist narrative. For instance, The Four-Gated City is structurally conventional but the unconventional elements and the apocalyptic ending suggest that Lessing is appealing to a form beyond realism. Moreover, Lessing did not abandon realism once and for all. The Summer Before the Dark (1973), for instance, remains largely realistic, oscillating between Kate Brown's inner thoughts and a more distant, objective perspective to highlight the conflict between her true self and her identity encoded by society. Through her works from the 1970s and the 1980s we can see that Lessing is constantly seeking forms alternative to realism.

As an extraordinarily prolific writer, who has written on a wide variety of themes and genres, Lessing has come to believe that what matters most in a story is the message it carries, rather than its form or content. In her own words, her "major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk thorough the way it was shaped." (Lessing, Preface 13) In an interview for The Paris Review, Lessing says it would be "narrow-minded" to stick to either way of narration – realist novel or science fiction ("The Art of Fiction"). When asked about the

nature of her choice of genres, she replies with the following words: “I see every book as a problem that you have to solve. That is what dictates the form you use. It’s not that you say, ‘I want to write a science fiction book.’ You start from the other end, and what you have to say dictates the form of it.” (Lessing, “The Art of Fiction”) This realization might also be a message or a reminder that Lessing sends to her earlier self and her character Martha Quest as a young reader. Indeed, as a realist novel, Martha Quest fails to fulfill the protagonist’s ambition to resist the grand narrative. However, if we see the novel “as a problem” one has to solve, Martha Quest successfully dramatizes this as yet unsolved problem and functions as a self-reflective mirror to edge toward the outer limits of realism. Lessing’s experiments with and reflections on literary forms encourage us to envision our reality and show us the importance of imagining an elsewhere and thinking beyond the frame.

A realist novel, Martha Quest questions its own relation to realism by exploring Martha’s ambivalent relationship with books. Martha is a devoted reader who relies on books as guides to a more ideal city, but her efforts are often misguided and dead-ended because she is caught between the ideological complicity of language and convention that predetermines her lived experiences. Lessing confronts a dilemma that Terry Eagleton mentions about how literature transmits ideology: “in selecting a form … the writer finds his choice already ideologically circumscribed,” and “[t]he languages and devices a writer finds to hand are already saturated with certain ideological modes of perception, certain codified ways of interpreting reality” (Eagleton 26-27). The literary form and language are both determined and determining. Martha Quest vividly portrays the stalemate that both Martha as a young reader and Lessing as a young writer are locked in as they create and constrain the narratives they struggle to resist and fail to free themselves from the conventionality, hegemony and repression of the previous generations. Martha’s disappointment with her reading experience mirrors Lessing’s frustration as a writer, which leads to a more digressive and experimental narrative in The Golden Notebook and the later volumes of the Children of Violence series, which scrutinize the conventions of fictional realism and challenge the assumption that literary and linguistic forms are innocent reflections of reality. As an early work of an author who produced 28 novels and more than 40 other books, Martha Quest might still be susceptible to ideological complicity in its form of a realist novel but through her

representation of Martha's struggle as a reader Lessing reminds us that we should read any literature with a critical distance. Furthermore, Martha Quest shows us that Lessing herself, as a writer, is at the time of writing this novel in the process of working through the gap between form and content, finally coming to the realization that what matters actually goes beyond both. This novel, then, does not only concern itself with the personal development of a young girl; it also acts as a bildungsroman of Lessing's writing strategies.

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[1] In recent decades, as far as I know, very few scholars have paid sufficient attention to Martha Quest. Early publications from 1973 to 1980 mostly deal with the Children of Violence series as a whole and the discussion on the first novel Martha Quest tends to be marginalized. For instance, Sydney Janet Kaplan's 1973 paper focuses on "the limits of consciousness" in Lessing's novels and her discussion centers mainly around The Four Gated City and The Golden Notebook, in which "the feminine consciousness has integrated, and the idea of individual consciousness itself has been radically altered" (537). In Kaplan's words, when compared with Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage, Lessing's Children of Violence series shows how Martha discovers a "communal consciousness" in which "[h]er individualism is tempered by worldwide movements, historical changes, and the coming end of the known civilization" (538). Lynn Sukenick's 1973 essay "Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction" also puts an emphasis on the two aforementioned novels to examine Lessing's heroine's rejection of emotions and sensibility in order to form "a commitment to link private consciousness with historical event" (517). Margaret Scanlan's 1980 paper deals with the poor memory of Martha and how her memory tends to be generalized and repressed. Scanlan argues that this lack of connections to the previous novels confuses readers of the last volume, The Four-Gated City. Elayne Antler Rapping's 1975 essay "Unfree Woman: Feminism in Doris Lessing's Novels" focuses on the increasing conflict between political vision and the limitations both Lessing and her protagonist have to face, and argues that The Four-Gated City is "a synthesis of humanism and feminism, convention and experimentation" (30). In her 1978 essay Ellen I. Rosen analyzes Martha's frequent escape from her "mother" – both her biological mother and her motherland – and states that Lessing "focuses on women's responsibility to themselves and their duty to discover in themselves both activity and passivity, masculinity and femininity" (58). It seems that the novel Martha Quest and the Children of Violence series have been forgotten in the following 30 years. More recently, Frederick J. Solinger's 2014 essay "Nostalgia for the Future: Remembrance of Things to Come in Doris Lessing's Martha Quest" revisits Martha's deep longing to return to her imaginary "home," which "may have been and may yet be" (75). Solinger analyzes how nostalgia in the novel "functions as it is commonly understood and serves as a bulwark against discontinuity and as anodyne for characters estranged from the present and fearful for their futures" (83). Solinger rightly argues that Martha's homesickness is

complicated by her being a white girl in South Africa; while the present article shares a similar concern about Martha's complicated identity issues, my study focuses more on how her readership informs and complicates the process of her identification – a theme that seems to be overlooked in Solinger's essay.

[2] Established in 1971, The Observer is a British newspaper published on Sundays, which tends to take a more social liberal or social democratic position on most issues. The New Statesman and Nation, which was published under this name in the period between 1931 and 1964, was of a similar political disposition – leftist, anti-fascist and pacifist, especially during the 1930s. In the novel Martha Quest, The Observer is thought to be one of the "local newspapers" (Lessing, Martha Quest 152), and Martha is advised to remedy her choice of reading with The New Statesman and Nation, which she finds familiar, like a friend (153): in a sense, this magazine supports and echoes her free thinking.



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