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Echoes and Impacts of Borders and Places: An overview of Doris Lessing's Diasporic Identity and Travel Memoirs

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Abstract

Being born in Persia (now Iran) to the British parents, raised in colonial Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and lived in London, Doris Lessing's writings reflect her varied observations, experiences, issues, and concerns. They study her experiences with migration, her quest for identity through her challenges with the homeland and the host land, her description of cultural spaces and traits, her moments of nostalgia. This research paper explores on how these two borders and travel experiences have impacted her and her writings in developing her diasporic identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Borders, Travel Memoirs.

Travel, as understood in its most basic form is moving from one place to another. But going deeper into the essence of the word and its experience, travel is much more than the movement of a person from place to place. Be it a short or a long travel, it is a journey from the known to the unknown. A

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journey that could lead you towards exploring people and places beyond self, with similarities or differences, giving you opportunities to go beyond your inhibitions, opportunities of comfort and discomfort, of discoveries encountering nature and humanity; it gives you spaces and experiences that will sometimes drift oneself away from the self while sometimes it would bring one closer. While you travel you have occasions to enhance your senses, you see things from unexplored perspectives, you hear stories and voices that have narratives that stay with you beyond the measure of times, your tastes and opinions could be challenged or reaffirmed in ways that affects the way you think, and your thoughts impact you in a way that changes the way you feel.

With such an impact of travel on oneself, one looks for ways to revisit the experiences and discoveries. Travel writing as a genre has expanded over the years. From talking about the geographical boundaries to the personal boundaries, it has evolved and acquired an eminent place in the studies of literature. Travel writing could be understood as the medium through which the readers are introduced to the other place, people, culture, race with also being determined to observe the self. While doing so, one visits all the disciplines one has been exposed to from politics to philosophy to human relations. It acts as an window to provide the readers with the familiarity, a sense of curiosity, and feeling of belongingness, adventure, excitement, tools and resources to what is unknown to them, with narratives that could support them dive into the world of imagination and reality.

Travel brings a special kind of wisdom if one is open to it. At home or abroad, things of the world pull us toward them with such gravitational force that, if we are not alert our entire lives, we can be sucked into their outwardness. Attentive travel helps us to see this, because the continually changing outward scene helps us to see through the world's pretensions. With its phantasmagoric, kaleidoscopic character laid bare, we see it for what it truly is-perpetually perishing maya-and the world loses its wayer. We can understand how perpetual wandering can be a spiritual vocation, as with dedicated pilgrims and sannyasins. (Cousineau)

Lessing had often in her autobiographies has described in brief her travels and has given due importance to the observations with respect to people, places, situations, and things. The way she speaks gives us the glimpse of the way it had impacted her and also takes the reader to the times in its utmost detail. She had often travelled to Paris and speaks of how France was a dream, Lessing calls it, "Adorable France, which loves its women, gives them confidence in their femininity- and that from the time when they are tiny girls (Lessing, *Walking in the Shade* 25)" About her visit to Dublin she speaks of it as, "a sharp, biting poverty.(Lessing, *Walking in the Shade* 29)." She has often been to Germany as well and about one such trip of southern Germany she has written in her, 'The Eye of God in Paradise.' In her autobiography, *Under My Skin*, Lessing with peculiar details describes her travel as a young child who with her mother witnessed

hardship of travelling ordinarily to England via Moscow across Russia. She gives us a brief of what it meant to travel for a foreign family after the Revolution in 1924. The cabin they were asked to settle in was absolutely a menace and stunk with the smell of lice; there was scarcity of food, there were diseases like typhoid and typhus that were spread everywhere. "And every station was swarming with beggars and homeless children...(Lessing, *Under My Skin* 41)." It was the time post the great Epidemic Flu and many people who boarded in "were in rags, some seemed like bundles of rags, and with their feet tied in rags. Children with sharp hungry faces jumped up at the train windows and peered in, or help up their hands, begging. (Lessing, *Under My Skin* 41)." Lessing on her travel to Berlin addresses to us on how looking at people with no arms, legs and or eyes on Berlin's platform made her realize of the disaster war had done and how badly it has crippled the life of people, which made her torment herself and at the same time gather courage to self-reflect on what good putting herself in such miserable place would do to her.

Travel is a journey where one opens doors for one to transform, develop or relive the life, giving new meanings to one's identity. Carl Thompson in his famous book *Travel Writing* talks about the prominent presence of 'alterity' as an evident element of a journey and speaks of how then our journeys become more of our 'confrontation or optimistic negotiations' of things that makes us feel different in our journeys. At the same time he speaks of how 'there are no

foreign peoples with whom we do not share a common humanity' and so "all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity and identity, difference and similarity."(Thompson 9)

In alignment to the understanding of these discoveries of 'alterity and identity or differences and similarity' we do also see travel as a concept of home which perpetually combines and permutes in the journey and leaves the very concept of home as unfixed or impermanent. Of this state of 'unfixed home' comes out another thread of 'existential or identity crises' with the feeling of alienation and struggle of belongingness especially in the context of individuals who have been a part of different borders. This very element connects us to the prominence of such ideas, feelings, characters, description, and personal struggle present in diasporic writings. Diaspora has come from a Greek word 'diasperio', which culminated to mean 'to scatter'. Over the years it has evolved and is been used in various disciplines and speaks of the concepts like, quest for identity, concept of home, migration, nostalgia and guilt. Martin Baumann says, "The idea of Diaspora has been celebrated as expressing notions of hybridity, heterogeneity, identity, fragmentation and (re)construction, double consciousness, fractures of memory, ambivalence, roots and routes, discrepant cosmopolitanism, multilocationality and so forth"(Baumann)

Though Doris Lessing is profoundly and predominantly known for her themes like Feminism, Communism and Sufism, there are can also be a lens that looks at her as a

diasporic writer while studying her work. Being born in Persia (now Iran) to the British parents, raised in colonial Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and lived in London her writings reflect her varied observations, experiences, issues and concerns across borders. She had felt a different attachment with the life at Southern Rhodesia and sometimes there is a sense of newness after moving to London. This sense of movement has also given her a wide scope of themes projecting the two major places of her life that she had lived in. Her vast scope of writing includes stories of the land she spent her initial adulthood at, which is Southern Rhodesia. Borders gave her chances to dwell psychologically both into the mind of white people and the black people. It gave her room and inspiration to observe, analyze and create experiences of migration, exile, and nostalgia for audience to read and connect to.

I've finished a book on Zimbabwe. I lived in Southern Rhodesia from age five to thirty, but under the white rule, I was prohibited immigrant for thirty years. I have been back there times since black rule and the book is selected memories about how things used to and are now. It's called African Laughter...(Lessing, *The Older I get, the Less I Believe*)

Lessing and her family has been a victim of economic conditions that forced the family to migrate to African Farms in hope of better stability. The consequences of war also have an impact. Being among the colonized community, looking at the injustice and the rise of communism, her personal desires of being a writer and the stories about England that she kept

hearing from her mother creates a hybrid experience for an individual. Lessing speaks of her quest and confusion of her identity, "While I certainly knew 'who I was', I did not know how to define myself as a social being." (15) The communist ideology which she acquired as part of her observations and situational beliefs at Southern Rhodesia remained a part of her identity for a longer time in London as well. Even when she would want to disagree on some facts or have her doubts it became another struggle for her to put it forth. The impact of being for so long in Southern Rhodesia and for writing about it she had often been looked at by people in London as an outsider, "'She's written a book,' said this woman, or a girl, a South African temporarily in London. 'Then we're going to ban it' was the jocular reply(Lessing, *Walking in the Shade* 24)."

Lessing speaks of London while describing it her autobiography as a place she looked at with a child's curiosity. 'London I was returned to a child's way of seeing and feeling, every, person, building, bus, street, striking my senses with the shocking immediacy of a child's life, everything oversized, very bright, very dark, smelly, noisy.'(*Walking in the Shade*, 4). A new home that she has been all dreaming of while she was in Southern Rhodesia. A life of her own that would give her a new identity that she wanted to live, she called it 'the begging of her new life' (*Walking in the Shade*, 3). Nevertheless, to her disappointment London was not the same as she had dreamed of it. It had gone through the destruction caused due to WWII

and was building itself up. She also mentions that while she was looking for publishers, she had been introduced by Michael Joseph as an 'African Writer'. For more than 20 years of her life she had spent in Southern Rhodesia and her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* had been about a white family on the black farm. Lessing disappointment and attachment to the Southern Rhodesia is clearly visible in her expression below on being exiled from the country for 25 years, "It never crossed my mind I could be: the impossibility was a psychological fact, nothing to do with daylight realities. You cannot be forbidden the land you grew up in, so says the web of sensations, memories, experience, that binds you to that landscape.(Lessing)"

Lessing in her essay 'On Africa' describes an instance where she faced the crisis of proving her identity due the complexities of being born in Persia but belonging to a European race. She was called 'Asian.' For her that was the first encounter where she was put into a situation where she had to pick a race that she had to claim as her own. And when chose European with a birth place as Persia she was asked by the officials that she was 'prohibited' unless she had her required immigration documents. "Then you are an Asiatic. You know the penalties for filling in the form wrongly?(Lessing, *Being Prohibited* 158)." Such instances have been repeated in her life multiple times. One such time again when she was asked to disembark her flight and return home while travelling to Africa. She expresses her disappointments with considering what if the restrictions put

on her are not because of her "political views, but to the accident of her birth place(Lessing, Being Prohibited 160)"

Stuart Hall in one of the essays "Culture Identity and Diaspora says "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.(Hall)" In Lessing's fiction we often see characters who have been placed into the circumstances and situations that requires them to self-reflect and bring a change and transform themselves into new beings. Anna from *The Golden Notebook*, writes different diaries exploring metaphorically the different identities or characters she holds within, Kate Brown in *Summer Before the Dark* tries to reconstruct her identity by taking a break and moving away from her family, in *To Room Nineteen*, Susan suffers from a sense lost identity and self – discovery. Martha in the Children of Violence Series whose last name 'Quest' itself suggests of the journey she goes in constructing her identity. Despite writing realistic novels about the experiences of Africa, despite the attachment and nostalgia she felt about the beautiful landscape, she had faced the dilemma of belonging to that place, her identity felt incomplete. Her mother who constantly missed England and called it her home and the sense of isolation she felt. "That England they (her parents) talked about, all that green grass and spring flowers and cows as friendly as cats--what had all that to do with me?(Lessing, Under My Skin 82)"This nostalgia of missing the land can be autobiographically looked at in her protagonist from *The Grass is Singing*.

Lessing as an individual crossed borders and lived her life in two countries that stood strong against each other in the history of colonization, her parents always believed in being England as their home and yet spend all major part of their life in African farms, Lessing herself spent the youth in Southern Rhodesia dreaming about going to England, and while she stayed in England she wrote a great deal about Southern Rhodesia, the quest for identity and the willingness to break across all borders from physical to mental. The very reason I believe she was more a humanistic and disliked being labeled into any category of writing. She at the young age while being asked for her race says,

I had written on the form: Nationality, British, race, European; and it was the first time in my life I had had to claim myself as a member of one race and disown the other. I remember distinctly that I had to suppress an impulse opposite Race: Human. (Lessing, Being Prohibited)

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