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ON THE BORDERS OF GENRES: DORIS LESSING'S
ALFRED AND EMILY

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse some of Doris Lessing's life writings to show how the process of identity formation through autobiography is realised through the prisms of memory, history and narrativization.

The investigation of Lessing's sense of selfhood in her autobiographical and fictional works will focus on *Alfred and Emily*, her last book, as well as on *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* and *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography 1949 to 1962*.

The study will highlight the autobiographical nature of Lessing's fiction and the fictionality and constructed nature of her autobiography, in order to demonstrate that she constantly crosses the borders of genres in her life-long process of identity formation. As the autobiographical act is a rereading of one's past, I will argue that for Doris Lessing it is a process that relies heavily on the memory of experiences that have shaped her identity. Memory and identity are intimately related, in a way that becomes integral to the very construction of the writer's self.

The process of self-representational writing enables Lessing to sustain a dialogue with her past in an attempt to heal inner divisions and traumatic experiences. Rather than a simple process of self-reflection, her writings under scrutiny here also turn out to be a potential source of self-invention and self-revision of the conventional views on authorial identity.

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1. Introduction

The definition of autobiography as a narrative or story that recounts the writer's experiences or events in his life has been critically revised within the last years and Lejeune's initial attempts at defining the genre have been challenged by the postmodern theories on autobiography which question the correspondence between the written text of biographical research and the lives it investigates, deconstructing the idea of a coherent, essential, unchanging and unitary self. Thus, life writing becomes a construction of one's experience, rather than a faithful mirroring of it.

Betty Bergland (1994, p. 134) moves the subject of autobiography into the field of postmodern theory, and asks a crucial question about the way we should read the contemporary autobiographical subject: 'do we read at the centre of the autobiography a 'self', an *essentialist individual*, imagined to be coherent and unified, the originator of her own meaning; or do we read a *postmodern subject* – a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses?'. The 'shared interest in theorising the subject', the recognition of the fluid boundaries of the subject, and its status as 'subject-in-process' seem to be the common denominators of autobiography and postmodernism (Ashley, Gilmore, & Peters, 1994, p. 3). The individual, thus, appears as a 'discursive formation', with autobiography being one of its major discourses (Ashley, Gilmore, & Peters, 1994). In this sense, autobiography comes to the aid of postmodern fiction (Hornung, 1985, p. 71) and gives 'postmodernism a text and discourse through which to theorize human agency' (Ashley, Gilmore, & Peters, 1994, p. 8). Both autobiographical and postmodern texts appear to be the site of identity production.

In the face of widespread convictions about the 'death of the author' or the 'death of the novel', autobiographical writing seems to be an anachronistic project. However, such a futile enterprise has proven to be not only still alive, but also experimental; contemporary writers use the playful and boundary-crossing techniques in order to affirm or deny their 'I'.

2. Problem Statement

Doris Lessing loves paradox and champions ambiguity by experimenting with hybrid genres, such as autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography, which squeeze fiction and autobiography into each other. My point here is that in Volume One of her autobiography, *Under My Skin*, Lessing constructs a public, false self in order to protect her private self, and in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* she uses a hybrid form, fictional autobiography, to analyze her 'self' fictionally, while in *Alfred and Emily* she feels the need to enlarge her narrative technique by resorting to counterfactual history (Sperlinger, 2009).

3. Research Questions

This study sets out to answer three main questions: Which are the fictional games Doris Lessing plays with? Can she remain within the borders of a certain genre? How does the writer negotiate her personal identity? The question of fictionality is also important, and I consider it intrinsic to Lessing's autobiographical enterprise.

As part of her ‘experiment’ with genre and narrative techniques, I find it necessary to analyse Lessing’s blurring the boundaries between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, and her understanding of the relationship between narrative and ‘self’ in *Alfred and Emily* and, occasionally, to make references to her autobiography, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* and *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography 1949 to 1962*.

4. Purpose of the Study

This contribution considers the narratological and psychological implications of some of Doris Lessing’s writings, loosely labelled as autobiographical, in order to investigate the thin line between what is personal and what is fictional. It is not my aim here to pinpoint one definitive border between autobiography and fiction; I mean to outline various areas where autobiography and fiction interact in a number of key texts.

The term autobiography is used here to denote any text which is clearly published as such, whether through its title or subtitle. Generic differences and questions about the definition of the genre of autobiography are inevitably constant preoccupations for anyone writing on autobiography. I start from the premise that there are generic differences, only to demonstrate that Doris Lessing constantly challenges them.

5. Research Methods

Philippe Lejeune is useful as a starting point in my argument, because he clearly describes the autobiographical pact and autobiography as a genre, as a contractual genre based on identity (‘identicalness’) between the author, narrator, and protagonist. By contrast, he shows how, in the related genre of autobiographical fiction, the striking similarities between author, narrator and protagonist (which Lejeune calls resemblance) require the reader ‘to go back to an impossible world – beyond – the text’ (Lejeune, 1992, p. 21). Lejeune’s definitions, however, are reductive and have their limitations. Defining autobiography as a ‘retrospective prose narrative that a real person makes of his own existence, when he emphasizes his individual life, especially the history of his personality’ (Lejeune, 1992, p. 4), he shows a traditional understanding of autobiography and subscribes to the idea of ‘the universal subject’, as a ‘fixed, extralinguistic entity consciously pursuing its unique identity’ (Smith, 1993, p. 5).

Such a traditional vision of the integral Self and its autobiographical expression has been the object of revisions over the last years; with the result that the self is neither integral, nor private, or unique. Postmodern concepts take the self for a symbolic construct rather than a referential one; that is to say, the Self is not a unified psychological representation, whose ‘essence’ or ‘identity’ is prior to the language which expresses it; rather, its essence and identity are constituted by the language that produces it. Moreover, as I have already claimed, Betty Bergland provides an important theoretical support, in that she redefines the meaning of the ‘speaking subject’ of autobiography as ‘a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses’ (Bergland, 1994, p. 134).

A somehow similar position to that of Lejeune is Helen Buss's, who emphasizes that autobiography requires a much more intimate relationship between author, text and reader than fiction. Thus, she observes that,

Autobiography offers a different contract with the reader, a guarantee that the writer is taking the risk of opening a revelation of some part of his / her own personal life. Fiction writers may indeed draw on their lives for material, but they need not attest to this. Whether it be an event in personal history, a memoir of some significant other, or the tender life of dream or fantasy, the autobiography offers a portion of the vulnerability of the personal self in a gesture of public testimony in order to facilitate some communal therapeutic purpose, to effect some change, some healing, some new way of being in the world (Buss, 1995, p. 6).

For several decades, Lessing prefers not to 'risk' the 'guarantee' that she is revealing some portion of her 'personal life' and, therefore, does not 'facilitate' the 'communal therapeutic purpose' or 'personal healing'. In *Under My Skin* she writes:

I need to sleep and dream myself whole. I was full of divisions.... Dreams insisted in a hundred ways that I was dangerously unhappy about the infants I had left, about my father.... and about my mother (Lessing, 1995, p. 298).

I believe that, first in her fiction, then in her autobiography, Lessing learns to dream her formerly-divided self-whole, primarily by imaginatively reconciling her life-long conflict with her mother, after her mother's death, offering a creative solution to her 'community' of readers, a possible way in which to heal a conflicting relationship (which tormented Lessing, as evinced by her preoccupation with mother-daughter conflicts in her fiction and autobiography, forty years after her mother's death)

6. Findings

In the early phase of her writing career (the 1950s and 1960s), Lessing chose to fictionalize her life and write comfortably within the genre of the novel, where, because of its different reading contract, she 'need not attest to' her sources (however closely characters and events might resemble those in her own life). With *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), Lessing ventures away from the clear-cut distinction of fiction and the protection it provides when she explores her conflicting relationship with her mother in this blended work of fiction and 'dream autobiography' (*Under My Skin* 29). Here Lessing analyzes her life through the 'fictionalysis' – a term Daphne Marlatt describes as 'a self-analysis that plays fictively with the primary images of one's life, a fiction that uncovers analytically that territory where fact and fiction coincide' (Marlatt, 1990, p. 15) – of an anonymous first-person narrator, the narrator's younger self, Emily, and her unnamed mother. What might have become an imaginatively reconciliation with her mother in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, exploded again in *Alfred and Emily* (Lessing, 2008). An act of redemptive sympathy, in the author's intention to provide an alternative life for her parents, proves to be only one of retrospective sympathy. The book has a fiercely obsessive base, driven by the foundational truths of Doris Lessing's being: her mother, World War I, and Africa. While its hybrid form is new,

comprising a novella, a notebook and a memoir, Lessing demonstrates once again the frailty of the frontier between fact and fiction.

Lessing's factual and fictive treatment of hers and her parents' lives in the hybrid 2008 novella-memoir form reinforces the perception of border-crossing shown continuing up to the most recent work.

Doris Lessing's last novel, *Alfred and Emily*, which was named after Lessing's parents, is a remarkably new hybrid form, which borrows equally from memoir, autobiography, fiction and social history and tells the story of her parents' lives both as they were and as they might have been, had it not been for the First World War. It might be seen as an attempt to make sense of a personal problem: of the trauma of the war that shaped not only Alfred and Emily's life, but Lessing's as well. In a belated acknowledgement of Alfred and Emily as individuals, separate from her and from one another, she offers them, in the first part, a world without the war; without each other; consequently without their daughter – and by extension, without their author.

The second part is Lessing's memoir, where she tries, through her own memories, to describe her parents as they were, the overall outcome being thus the idea that the imaginary and memory can overlap, as memory is in some ways also subject to imagination.

The book might also be read as the postscript of an author who reaffirms fiction's powers and its endless possibilities. Lessing's ongoing interest in formal experimentation is clearly manifested in this last book, whose structure has received diverse critical reception. Virginia Tiger notes that it is 'trptych-like in form' and identifies three panels: a novella, a notebook and a memoir. The notebook, according to Tiger, has the function of offering 'an authorial gloss on the novella's imaginative mulch' (Tiger, 2009, pp. 22-24). Susan Williams states that *Alfred and Emily* is made up of two parts, or 'rather, it is two books. The first is a novella, in which she rewrites their lives; the second is based on fact' (Williams, *The Independent*, 16 May 2008).

I would say that Lessing's book is made up of more than three parts. Besides the novella, entitled "Alfred and Emily", a four-page notebook "Explanation" and a memoir "Alfred and Emily: Two Lives", there is a Foreword which announces her attempt to 'give them [her parents] lives as might have been had the Great War not happened' (Lessing, 2008, viii).

Lessing was always fascinated by the ways in which the author writes herself into her fictions, and creates fiction from lived experience, as she has repeatedly proved in her autobiographical writings.

The element of novelty she brings here is the narrative technique of posing a happy imaginary life versus the real one. By imagining a counterfactual scenario, an alternative fictional world for her parents, set in an alternative history not damaged by the war, she reworks events in her life as they were and as they might have been.

Roese and Olson observe, from the perspective of psychological research, that 'counterfactual thinking is an essential feature of consciousness', which involves our tendency to create possible alternatives to what we have already lived, but with a positive future outcome, in that 'it is from articulation of better possible pasts that individuals may realize more desirable futures' (Roese and Olson, 1995, p. 46).

In the Foreword, Lessing expresses her hope, and, at the same time, the intention of giving her parents a better life: 'I hope they would approve the lives I have given them' (Lessing, p. viii). This propensity to append author notes and prefaces to her novels attests to her wish to determine how she

should be read. It is a trick she returned to more than once in her fiction; with the very form of her final book, she turned on the concept of her own authorship – her own presence in or absence from the text.

With this counterfactual format, in combination with the autobiographical approach, the author feels free to construct her writing by choosing what to leave out and what to include.

We already know from her autobiography that there is no privileged position from which to articulate the true version of any experience; it rather depends on the different angles from which memory and recounting are observed. Yet, the heavy burden of personal experience and historical circumstances comes to the fore under the form of trauma with its two basic sources – the war and her mother.

Cathy Caruth, an exponent of a postmodernist approach to trauma theory, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, has redefined the concept of psychic trauma according to ‘the structure of its experience’: ‘Trauma does not only simply serves as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned’ (Caruth, 1995, p. 151). Drawing on Sigmund Freud’s writings on trauma, more specifically on the concept of *Nachtraglichkeit* or “deferred action”, defined by Caruth as a structure of temporal deferral, she holds that ‘the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it’ (Caruth, 1995, p.4).

What Lessing attempts in *Alfred and Emily* is not only to represent and communicate her own and her parents’ historical experience, but also to make sense of and alleviate her own traumatic memories of the past by using unusual modes of access to history. And, in so doing, she explores the disruptive impact of History on the personal histories of single individuals:

That war, the Great War, the war that would end all war, squatted over my childhood. The trenches were as present to me as anything I actually saw around me. And here I still am, trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free (Lessing, 2008, p. viii).

That the First World War is central to Doris Lessing’s life and writing is also evident both in *Under My Skin* where she states that her interest in this watershed event has grown with time rather than diminished: ‘That war does not become less important to me as time passes, on the contrary’ (Lessing, p.8) and in *Walking in the Shade*, the second volume of her autobiography where she imagines herself as a collective subject doomed by the historical plague: ‘I was one of a generation brought up on World War I and then as much formed by World War II’ (Lessing, p.16). By questioning retrospectively how historical trauma marks the life cycle of individuals and generations she articulates both historical connections with the others and historical belatedness in terms of personal memories. Thus, trauma becomes part of the survivor’s identity.

The inheritance of trauma and conflict also permeates and surfaces Lessing’s writings under the form of a tense relationship with her own mother. Doris Lessing’s *Alfred and Emily* can be seen as the author’s attempt to understand, as well as transform the powerful parental figures of her childhood, giving literary form to a lifelong search of coming to terms and resolving conflicted feelings about her parents: ‘Do children feel their parents’ emotions? Yes, we do, and it is a legacy I could have done without. What is the use of it? It is as if that old war is in my own memory, my own consciousness’ (Lessing, 2008, p. 258).

Although trying to struggle free from the ghost of her mother, who still overwhelms the now ninety-year-old daughter, one can never forget how shockingly Lessing (1994, p. 179) decided in *Under My Skin* that ‘I hated my mother’. So visceral is the starkness of the four simple words that they suggest the warfare that was no fair war – consisting, as it had, in negations, subversions, word battle. As the memoirist of *Alfred and Emily*’s third panel remonstrates, “*Martha Quest* was, I think, the first no-holds-barred account of a mother-and-daughter battle. It was cruel, that book. Would I do it now? But what I was doing was part of the trying to get free” (Lessing, 2008, p. 178). Art and life mingle when in the next sentence Lessing (2008, p. 178) adds: “I would say *Martha Quest* was my first novel, being autobiographical and direct. My first novel *The Grass is Singing* was the first of my *real* novels”. She defines here her life writing with its porous boundaries between fact and fiction.

The theme is maternal plenitude provoking the daughter’s rage, the violent fantasies giving birth to reverberating desires, those, in turn, generating guilt and the need to bring about some reparation, some bonds with the mother, and some effort at reconstructing both damaged figures: daughter and mother. Yet it took Doris Lessing “years – and years – and years – to see [that] my mother had no visible scars, no wounds, but she was as much a victim of the war as was my poor father” (2008, p. 172). If her father’s obsessive stories about the Trenches – “tanks, star-shells, shrapnel, howitzers” (2008, p. 170) – were his way of trying to dispel the horrors, then her mother’s reliving her war years, nursing battalions of soldiers in London’s Royal Free Hospital was her way of healing.

While the second half is supposed to be a factual description of her parents, a full account is not yet given of how Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh grew up, met, married, survived the war, came to Persia and then left it, or settled in Southern Rhodesia. Instead, there is an emphasis on particular aspects of the narrative, some of which Lessing has written about before:

“I have written about my father in various ways; in pieces long and short, and in novels. He comes out clearly, unambiguous, all himself. One may write a life in five volumes, or in a sentence. How about this? Alfred Taylor, a vigorous and healthy man, was wounded badly in the First World War, tried to live as if he were not incapacitated, illness defeated him, and at the end of a shortened life he was begging: ‘You put a sick old dog out of its misery, why not me?’” (Lessing, 2008, p.152)

Although Lessing has frequently written about her father, he remains an elusive figure. The focus is on the tense relationship between Emily McVeagh and her daughter: ‘I was desperately sorry for my mother, even as I was planning to run away from her’ (Lessing, 2008, p. 156). Lessing has covered this ground before, in fiction and autobiography, but she is never quite satisfied because ‘Nothing fits, as if she were not one woman but several’ (Lessing, 2008, p. 156). Multiple identities come to the fore again when Lessing, in a desperate attempt to understand her reason for her war with her mother, projects herself into her mother’s story. One possible answer would be locating Emily’s rebellion in a contrary desire not to please her father, which, with more complexity, was also Lessing’s attitude to her mother.

“John McVeagh, unusually for his time, wanted his clever daughter to go university. It had to be the girl, and not the boy, who wasn’t good enough. His ambitions therefore were focused

on [Emily], the one who passed examinations and was always at the top of the class. But she said, 'No.' to him and went off to be a nurse, which made him say, apparently without any consciousness of the absurdity of it: 'Never darken my doors again.' and 'I shall no longer consider you my daughter.' Now, there is something inexplicable here. The Royal Free Hospital was training women doctors: why did she not decide to be a doctor? Her father would surely have been pleased – but I have answered the question. Precisely: her father would have been pleased. So, no, she would be a nurse and 'wipe the bottoms of the poor' (Lessing, 2008, p. 187).

This is too easy an answer. There seems to be more in this story. One possibility is implied in the assertion that 'it had to be the girl and not the boy'. Emily was expected to play the part of a son, an echo of which is heard in Lessing's complaint that her mother 'was convinced that I would be a boy, and didn't even have a name for a girl' (2008, p. 178). Lessing invokes that as a reason for being disappointed in her mother.

There is also another episode, this time in the imaginative counterfactual history of her parents, in which Emily longs for maternal affection in her own childhood, and blames everything on her mother:

Had her mother ever actually held and cuddled and dandled her, as Emily had seen Ivy do with her own infant? Did she want to think about it? At least she must decide if she wanted to think about it. What she did not want was for grief to rush out of the dark pit it lived in and fasten on her heart (Lessing, 2008, p. 137).

Lessing has explored the 'dark pit' of grief before. She is a great chronicler of experience, and her characters frequently have more of it than they can handle. Thus, Emily is not unusual among Lessing's protagonists, in her struggle to assimilate what has happened, or in having second thoughts that come too late. This is all the same more effective because Emily 'must decide if she wanted to think about it'. 'At least' implies that as much energy is needed to bury the past as is required when one needs to confront trauma.

In *Alfred and Emily* we can see that traumatic or negative outcomes tend to trigger both factual and counterfactual writing.

What was supposed to be an alternative history, a 'happy' one in Lessing's own words, is actually a hybrid of fact and fiction.

Fact and fiction do not so much blur as bleed into one another, a matter given greater weight when we inspect the two photographs preceding the novella's opening page. In one, a woman stares resolutely forward; in the other we see a young man, dressed for the cricket pitch.

Moving between the invented and the actual, the temporal now of fiction is dislodged when the memoirist cuts in, with more than one prolepsis. Her memorial commentary dispels the invented world. What also arrests the narrative flow forward is the Tayler family photo album. It is interspersed throughout *Alfred and Emily*. The reader has a sense of dislocation.

Despite her intention to set lives right, Lessing has not given her mother a happy alternative life. In fact, a psychological climate of pain suffuses the entire novella. If our first encounter is with a weeping

Emily, the very last line, addressed to Emily on the penultimate page is the following: 'I don't mind if you cry. Cry as much as you like' (Lessing, 2008, p. 137). Thus, *Alfred and Emily* is not an act of redemptive sympathy, but one of retrospective sympathy, suggesting that the past and its traumatic events must be reworked imaginatively, even when we think we have recovered from it.

Lessing's persistent impulse to cross borders in her work and life has also been evident in her autobiographical writing. Starting from Lejeune's definition of autobiography as being a 'retrospective prose narrative that a real person makes of his own existence, when he emphasizes his individual life, especially the history of his personality' (Lejeune, 1992, p. 4), and his autobiographical pact, which considers the genre of autobiography as a contractual genre, based on the identity between author-narrator-protagonist, the analysis has demonstrated that Lessing could not remain within the boundaries of the genre. What she has realized instead has been an increasing experimentation in genre and narrative technique, which led to the construction of hybrid genres such as autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography, which squeeze fiction and autobiography into each other. By analyzing her own identity, Lessing has placed her 'self' in different discourses, and has managed to re-invent herself each time. Her autobiographical writing has revealed that Lessing is a postmodern author whose self is never fixed; her 'self' is a forever changing subject, and her art is open-ended.

7. Conclusion

Fictive biography, autobiographical fiction, memoir, epigraph, foreword, afterword, and preface, autobiography: these are the many modes Lessing has adopted in her lifelong writing about life-writing. We know, or at least we suppose we know about her early years in the autobiography *Under My Skin*, her adolescence in the novel *Martha Quest*, her childhood in the *Memoirs of a Survivor*, her thirties in *Walking in the Shade*, and her ninth decade, in what she declares her last book *Alfred and Emily*. We do not know much actually; she feeds us with illusions. The author does not know. However hard she tried to make sense of her story, she is still 'trying to get free' (viii). Doris Lessing has left us with a sense of inconclusiveness and an opening up of the past, with retrospective possibilities, alternative lives and therefore alternative texts, with an acknowledgment that these are not the only ways life could have been written; there may be other ways, probably just as valid as the texts already written so far.

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