

# Analysis of the Protagonist Martha of Doris Lessing's Novel *Martha Quest*

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## Abstract

Doris Lessing was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1919, Kermanshah, Persia (now Iran) and died on 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2013. She is an accomplished, versatile genius and an artist with immense repute. She is an outstanding novelist to reckon with. Her *oeuvre* as an artist ranges from the short stories, biographies, dramas etc. Here, in this research paper, I will focus on and delve into the analysis of Martha, the protagonist of her novel *Martha Quest* (1952) of five novel series named *Children of Violence*. *Martha Quest* is the first novel of this series. Martha, being a remarkable protagonist, is the mouth-piece of Lessing, through which the novelist painted a stark picture with such a workmanship that the analysis of the protagonist is the chief concern of this paper from the standpoint of a young lady with her typical unorthodox and revolutionary mindset, her delusion, dissatisfaction, acrimonious relationship with her mother and her belligerent approach towards a society where she feels that she is trammled by the societal, political, economical and stereotype strictures which a lady or a woman has to go through and considers to break away from such yokes. This resulted in her choice to lead a life in city in search of her independence, resulted in various unprecedented episodes in her life such as romping with male counterparts, having an indeterminate experience which engenders from her frame of mind and her own choice for a life free from any strictures and constrictions in the hope of having her own leeway and her choice in having a different outlook towards life and its realistic being.

**Key Words :** immense, protagonist, workmanship, acrimonious, outlook etc.

## Introduction

Lessing's protagonists, as intelligent, sensitive women in the midst of racial and political turmoil necessarily find two areas, the racial and political, occupying much of their thought and activity, and as a corollary to this pre-occupation they become increasingly aware of their status in an essentially masculine world.

With *Martha Quest* (1952) Lessing began a sequence of five novels with a collective title *Children of Violence*. She has described the sequence as the Germans call '*Bildungsroman*'. The name of the eponymous heroine exemplifies that link in her quest for values to live by-Martha is to be the critic of her age, yet also it's representative, a child of her age, one of the children of violence.

### **Martha's Life and her State of Mind**

Martha Quest opens with Martha reading a book on sex by Havelock Ellis, and her mother and neighbours complaining about the alleged laziness of native workers, and the government regulations affecting farmers. Thus Martha's thoughts from her first appearance are concerned with those areas reflecting independence and emancipation, particularly sexual, and particularly from her parents restrictions. Although the 'conflict of generation' occurs frequently in Lessing's fiction it is in the continually strained relation between Martha and her mother, that this relation is more emphatically developed. Here, Martha's rebellion against her mother's values and restrictions can be seen as well founded although it is not until later that Martha compares herself to Ibsen's Nora in seeking emancipation. She from the outset is in conflict with Mrs. Quest, adding each new incident to many others she keeps in store in her memory, and by which she feels a sense of rebellion. Most of Lessing's female characters are concerned with either being free or lacking freedom, and Martha is especially concerned with liberating herself from the conformist institution around her.

Martha, aged fifteen, living on a genteel, but far from wealthy farm on the veld, is eager to break away from her confining home. Martha herself domineering and self righteous has to put up with a mother who is possessive and hypocritical, a well meaning but sickly father and a younger brother Janathan. She, however, maintains a kind of peaceful co-existence, she decides to work in the city as a secretary.

### **Martha's Marriage, Severance of Relationships and Her Dissatisfaction**

Later till she marries Douglas, a civil servant, has a child. Her marriage is a failure, she leaves her husband and daughter, joins a Marxist group which includes refugees and British airmen. Martha having divorced Douglas, marries a German Jew, who is a committed Marxist. She spends her time in political activities, but once again she is not satisfied, her marriage breaks, she is emotionally involved with a Polish Jew, Thomas Stern, through this relation she begins to understand herself. She leaves Stern as well and moves to England, here she meets Mark Coldridge, whose wife is considered abnormal, Martha takes over running the house and looking after the children. Her close association with Mark's wife Lynda draws her towards mysticism, and telepathy, which she feels would be essential for survival after a nuclear holocaust. The series ends with documents written after the holocaust, describing a new generation of children with extra-sensory perception and other qualities necessary in their new world.

Throughout the novel, Martha submits to new experiences not so much for what they offer, but in the hope that they will help define her. Martha seeks escapes from the farm to the town, then sex, then marriage, then political activity, as potentials for fulfillment. Each experience in turn fails to satisfy her.

## Martha Concept of Freedom and Her Outlook

It is obvious that Martha is self-consciously concerned with 'freedom' however ill defined it may be. As a typist in a law office the 'formal moribund language of legality' a constricting force (*Martha Quest*, p.93.) She discovers that a letter from Joss 'released her from the imprisonment like a kiss of prince in the fairy tale (p.207) when she and Douglas decide to marry the decision made her 'spiritually free again' (p. 234) when she first discovers that she is pregnant, she exults in her 'freedom' A Proper Marriage, pp.351-52) after Caroline's birth, she sees herself as free once again (p.418) but the conventional suburban life she finds a prison (510-11) and when she decides to leave her family, other women envy her 'escaping' (595). As a self styled 'free spirit' Martha sees the Communist party as giving women, a similar freedom but she feels 'caged and hemmed in her relationship with the Communist, Anton Hesse. This freedom, is she wishes it for all. Thus when Martha leaves her daughter she says, 'she is setting her free (p. 600). Martha wishes that women should have babies if they wished, even if they didn't have husbands though a friend of hers sees herself as no longer free because of her children and Martha subsequently feels that her freedom will not begin until she was in England. Freedom as envisioned by Martha is illusory, each new stage of life is anticipated freer than the previous one and each new stage is itself being seen as constricting, needing release by a further degree of freedom.

Akin to Martha's desire for freedom is her fear of the 'personal or psychological involvement with other person. She sees her mother as having a life, that is a complicated system of self denials' (p. 522). Being aware of the manner in which 'freedom' is postulated in her society by women like herself it is no surprise that Martha turns to sexual activity as the area in which her own freedom will be expressed.

## Her Conflicting Approach towards Life and Her Experiences

When we first meet Martha, we find her reading a book on sex by Havelock Ellis- "it is hardly possible to be bored by a book on sex when one is fifteen" (*Martha Quest*, p. 23). She herself rebuffs a lecherous old farmer when he makes advances and scorns the life denying expressions of disgust at sex, including sexual expressions in art, her mother's attempt to 'disinfect' sex by a humorous teasing only exasperates Martha. Her early dating, despite her desire to rebel is not overtly sexual in nature, her first 'serious' dating with Donovan is wholly non-physical and Platonic. She learns how to handle potentially erotic situations with overtly-eager adolescent boys. In an attempt to assert the independence from the Sports Club crowd, Martha loses virginity to a Jewish musician, who is not accepted by them, but even then her impulse is one of pity and defiance rather than what she really wants; her total lack of emotional commitment is essentially self-defeating and sterile for her.

The contradictory emotions Martha feels about marriage and yet the inexorable rush towards it is strange. Given Martha's view about the Sports Club men, it is surprising, she marries one of them. She knows Douglas's unsuitability but hopes that it would be alright after they married. Just as Adolp King, the Jew as a person was almost irrelevant to Martha's sexual initiation, since the initiation, was what mattered, not the person so Douglas

Knowell seems irrelevant to marriage. The state of marriage is an end in itself. Martha's choice of marriage is her escape route from the life she had been leading in the town, just as the town was an escape from the farm. Ironically, in fleeing from her parents and their values, she ends up in a marriage as claustrophobic as them.

Her next relationship is with Anton Hesse, which too was not enduring, though the marriage lasts for four years. She is not satisfied with him. It is not until she meets Thomas Stern, the displaced 'Jew' from Poland that Martha achieves a truly meaningful relationship but even this is short-lived. Thomas reverts to the same sort of desperate violent maniacal behaviour previously identified with Douglas. This affair too ends up in, as sterile and ultimately unsatisfactory a fashion as Martha's earlier affairs.

## Conclusion

Thus, Martha has come full circle from her adolescent interest in reacting against authority, first interested in radical social and political thought through books lent to her by friends, who were themselves members of a persecuted race, Martha has moved to full and active involvement in communist affairs and subsequently to voluntary exile from both the country and the leftist party itself. It is not out of fear of persecution but from a profound sense that the years as a communist have really accomplished nothing. The nostalgic feeling of helplessness she experiences when attending the meeting of the would be communists, feels very soon they would discover for themselves the exact meaning of their political involvement. The one cause for which she had been deeply concerned with – the cry for the racial justice and equality, is no closer to satisfactory resolution at the end.

## References

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