ABANDONING YOUTHFULNESS IN THE SUMMER BEFORE THE DARK

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Abstract: This paper presents one of Doris Lessing's inner space novels, The Summer Before the Dark which follows the inner and outer journey of a middle- aged woman, Kate Brown, who suffers of the empty-nest syndrome and tries to find her way in life beyond the motherhood and wifehood. Her inner journey is a painful and difficult one trying not only to accept the coming of old age but also to discover that all her life she played roles (wife and mother) and she dressed up and groomed herself according to those roles that now seem pointless and insignificant to her.

Keywords: inner journey, middle age, family.

Biographical background

The Summer Before the Dark, published in 1970 together with other two novels *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *The memoirs of a Survivor* are all concerned with the inner space. The inner space novels reveal clearly Lessing's intention to explore, not external reality, but the world within. In the preface of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, the writer states that she was writing a work of "inner space fiction" because "there is never anywhere to go but in".

The inner-space novels share a sick society whose individuals need to discover meanings in their lives. In *The Summer Before the Dark*, catastrophe can be averted by reducing the pressure created by gender roles, and thereby creating true equality. [1]

In *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate Brown' s inner journey represents her search for a new identity, which is a tortured investigation of the nature of appearance and reality, an investigation into what was true and false in her roles of woman, wife and mother. She is brought by her sense of emptiness, largely induced by her husband's escapades, to seek release from these roles, to try to uncover those roots in her being from which a new vitality could grow. Kate's search is a *conscious* search for a new and final integrity. At the same time, *subconsciously*, it is a desperate attempt at establishing some sort of harmony between her old self and the new self that is painfully coming into being. [2]

By the end of the novel Kate has taken "a long journey" (p. 204) which is mainly an inward journey, in the course of which she repudiates the conventions that have governed her behaviour as a woman. [3]

Through consciousness, Lessing exposes the inner walkings of the human mind and in this case, one can say that consciousness is the nucleus of this journey in the novel. Lessing in this stead shares her major theme - the fragmentation of civilization and consciousness - with a great many modern writers such as William Faulkner, James Joyce,

[1] Friedow, Kyle - **Spiritual Exploration in the Works of Doris Lessing**, *Extrapolation.* Kent: Spring 2002. Vol. 43, Iss. 1, p. 118
[2] Verleun, Jan - **The World of Doris Lessing's 'The Summer before the Dark'** , Neophilologus, 69:4, (1985:Oct.), p. 622
[3] Greene, Gayle - **Bleak Houses: Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and the Condition of England** , *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 28:4 (1992:Oct.), p. 306

Virginia Woolf, and William Golding. Possessing what is still too often rare for women writers.[4]

Structure and themes

Doris Lessing's *Summer Before the Dark* was first published in 1970 and its central theme is the role of women in society. The novel tells the story of a forty-five years old woman, a 'domestic goddess' [5] whose children are attaining independence and whose husband has wide interests he would prefer to pursue without her. Told largely through the words of the heroine, Kate Brown, the narrative leads the reader through the experiences of a single summer of crises and (re)discovery, during which Kate, who suffers of the empty-nest syndrome ("this was the first time in her life that she was not wanted"), passes from youthful maturity to the realization and acceptance of old age.

The change of seasons the title is referring to and the recurrent motif of "the cold wind" felt by Kate Brown clearly illustrates the central theme of the novel which is the women's experience of aging. The novel is particularly rich in the main character's reflections on her life and the questions she is trying to answer about what she was actually doing, what was she actually feeling and how she was perceived. "what her life had become, what it was going to have to be." By the end of the novel, Kate reflects that she is now "at the other end of what she suddenly was feeling as a long interior journey."

"In Kate Brown's survival is writ the postulate that old age cannot be reached or successfully negotiated without a resolution of the mid-life crisis. But the problems of aging and dying, as Lessing addresses them, cannot be neatly placed within the simpler contemporary confines of the phrase "mid-life crisis". [6]

The novel contains five sections: "At Home," "Global Food," "On Holiday," "The Hotel," and "Maureen's Flat." "Critics have long noted that Lessing often creates deeply imagined spaces in her fiction. The border between objective descriptions of houses, for example, and their subjective or connotative dimensions is often blurred, and descriptions of such places may shift over the course of a novel or story." [7]One of this novel's ironies is that Kate's work as a housewife and mother have taught her a lot for getting a managerial role in Global Food, and when on holiday with her younger American lover, Jeffrey she sometimes fulfils her maternal inclinations. The last two chapters present Kate being extremely ill and there are other women who tend to her.

At home

When the story starts, Kate is a "pretty, healthy, serviceable woman" who dresses in ways her husband and children approve; she behaves in ways "proper" for her age and status in society:

> *„A woman in a white dress, white shoes, a pink scarf around her neck, standing on grass.*
>
> *Now here was an area of choice, conscious, deliberate: her appearance was choice, all exquisite tact, for it was appropriate for this middle-class suburb and her position in it as her husband's wife. And, of course, as the mother of her children." (The Summer Before the Dark, p. 13)*

[4] Akujobi, Remi - **Madness As A Signifier: A Study Of Doris Lessing's Briefing For A Descent Into Hell**, Ife Psychologia. Ile-Ife: Sep 2008. Vol. 16, Iss. 2, p. 19

[5] '**The Summer Before the Dark' by Doris Lessing – Reading Matters**

[6] Sprague, Claire, 1987, **Rereading Doris Lessing –Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition**, The University of North Carolina, p. 109

[7] The Summer Before the Dark | Doris Lessing Society

Global Food

With her entire family away for the summer, she rents her house and takes a well-paid and interesting job, at which she excels because of her talents as a translator and her skills as wife and mother. Her employer regards her highly, is deferential and considerate of her wishes. She can afford to buy lovely and expensive new clothes. To this point, Kate's life seems like the ideal to which women whose children have grown are encouraged to aspire.

Kate learns that looks – the way she presents herself – define who she is. She gets an expensive, gorgeous haircut and has her hair dyed the dramatic red it was when she was a girl. She buys beautiful, eye-catching clothes.

> *„None of the clothes were any use, anyway. At some point during that week she rushed out to buy the dresses that would admit her, like a passport, to this way of life. Mrs. Michael Brown could not have been called ill-dressed; but it was not Mrs. Michael Brown who was being employed by Global Food." (The Summer Before the Dark, p. 31)*

Though, Kate is not satisfied. The roles she is asked to play differ little from the familiar ones she has known for more than twenty years: nurse, nanny, and mother - *"a parrot with the ability to be sympathetic about minor and unimportant obsessions."* She longs to be free:

> *„She had become what she was: a nurse, or a nanny, like Charlie Cooper. A mother. Never mind, in a few days she would be free of it all. She would no longer be a parrot with the ability to be sympathetic about minor and unimportant obsessions; she would be free..." (The Summer Before the Dark, p. 33)*

On Holiday

The quest for freedom leads her through an affair with a much younger man, a "middle-aged hippie" at age 30, who is taken ill while they are travelling in Spain. While waiting for her lover to recover, she contemplates the recent past and her life as wife and mother and realizes that her love affair has become another mother/child, nurse/patient relationship because with her American lover, Jeffrey, she alternately resists and fulfils her maternal inclinations. Jeffrey, himself, considers his options for becoming after this last undecided summer but Kate figures that most likely he will take a position in his father's Washington law firm.

While being stuck in rural Spain with her ill lover, she compares herself to Mary, her flirtatious friend and she suddenly realizes that Mary would not have even looked at this young man. Eventually, she figures that she should spend the summer analysing her life and her options on who she wants to be. Finally, she realizes what a disappointing affair they have and she returns to London alone.

The Hotel

Returning to London, she becomes ill herself. In a hotel room in Bloomsbury, the size of the smallest bedroom in her home, the weeks of her illness pass, the grey pushes up into her now lank, tarnished red hair. She loses weight, her skin becoming "creased and shabby." She longs for her husband and family, all far away. When she finally summons enough energy, she climbs on a bus and travels the several miles to her home, to find that her neighbour and friend of years does not recognize her. At first hurt by the lack of acknowledgment, she then becomes excited that she was not known; as though she's been set free. Upon reflection she is relieved to discover that friendship is shallow and easily disproved. Suddenly, it no longer matters to her that she was not seen - those who *are* seen,

who turn heads, begin to appear to her as parodies, as animals. At the theatre one evening, she looks around her:

> *„It was a room full of animals, dogs and cats and wolves and foxes that had got on their hind legs and put ribbons on themselves and brushed their fur... This was a thought even more useless if possible. There had been a caricaturist, hadn't there, who drew people as animals, so what was the point of thinking like this;* ***he*** *hadn't achieved anything by it, for all went on and on." (The Summer Before the Dark, p. 154)*

But what a remarkable thing it was, this room full of people, animals rather, all looking in one direction, at other dressed-up animals lifted up to perform on the stage, animals covered with cloth and bits of fur, ornamented with stones, their faces and claws painted with colour... and their hair was the worst: mats and caps and manes and wigs of hair, crimped and curled and flattened and lengthened and shortened, hair dyed all colours and scented and greased and lacquered. It was a room full of animals, dogs and cats and wolves and foxes that had got on their hind legs and put ribbons on themselves and brushed their fur:

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Kate's own hair was now a dry mass, her face an old woman's. On the spur of the moment, she realizes that she has spent years of her life in front of mirrors, to see how others would judge her. She had even limited her facial expressions to a small "acceptable" range. That no one sees her now that no heads turn when she walks past a group of men, is liberating, but also terribly confusing. The indifference of others, makes her realize that it was the notice of other people that had held her upright all her life. Yet a well-fitting dress, a little attention to her hair, is sufficient to attract men's notice. She realizes that the difference between drawing attention and failing to draw attention rests on small care taking, on wearing masks, on fitting oneself to a pattern:

> *„For the whole of her life, or since she was sixteen – yes, the girl making love to her own face had been that age – she had looked into mirrors and seen what other people would judge her by. And now the image had rolled itself up and thrown itself into a corner, leaving behind the face of a sick monkey." (The Summer Before the Dark, p. 158)*

Maureen's Flat

Both her rebellious temper and her determination to use the time left until her family will return, make her move again, to a less expensive place, where she befriends Maureen, a girl of her own daughter's age who knows her only as she has now become -"a thin monkey of a woman." But the call to return to her family comes sooner than expected. As the result of an illness, Kate's son will be home three weeks early. Suddenly she is caught up in the familiar pattern of telephoning, arranging, and organizing - until an outburst by Maureen stops her in her tracks. Maureen turns on her for what she sees her becoming - just like her own mother: nurse, servant, helper, housekeeper - what Maureen, herself, must become if she marries conventionally. Kate changes her mind, sends wires, and cancels plans. The family must manage without her for a while; she still has unfinished business:

> *„This was so much of an accusation, that Kate knew that everything she had organized in the way of returning to her own home was going to have to be undone again. She sat down at the kitchen table.*
>
> *,Why?'*

*‚I'd do anything, I'd live alone for **always** rather than turn into **that**.'*

*Kate, in silence, now looked at **that**, her self of a few minutes before." (The Summer Before the Dark, p. 158)*

Another important issue in this novel is that of invisibility and there are two episodes that attract the reader's attention: the first is in a restaurant and the second is out in the street trying or failing to draw male attention.

Kate goes to a restaurant, just before the lunch time and she discovers that her sex and her age have turned her into an invisible woman.

She sat by herself and waited for service. In front of her stood the unvarying British menu. At the other end of the room, a waitress was talking to a customer, an elderly man. She was in no hurry to come over. When she did come she did not look at Kate, but scribbled the order down hastily on a small pad, and went back to talk to the customer, before shouting the order through a hatch into the kitchen. It seemed a long time before the food came. Kate sat on, invisible, apparently, to the waitress and to the other customers: the place was filling now. She was shaking with impatient hunger, the need to cry. The feeling that no one could see her made her want to shout: 'Look, I'm here, can't you see me?' She was not far off that state which in a small child is called a tantrum. "

(The Summer Before the Dark, p. 203-204)

Later she realises that to receive attention, from both men and women alike, she must put on her 'Mrs Brown' face meaning to dress and groom herself carefully. Other revelations will soon follow.

Out in the street she passes a group of labourers. They do not notice her; she is angered. She walks away, takes off her jacket to show her fitted dress, ties back her hair dramatically with a scarf, then strolls again in front of the workmen. This time, she receives a storm of whistles, calls, invitations. She makes her small transformation once more. Once more she walks by unnoticed. Her anger grows to consuming proportions. She realizes that this is what she has been doing for years - acting as sex object. She again delays going home; she needs more time. She must gather strength, for when she returns she will walk into her home with her hair undressed, tied back, rough and streaky, with a wide band of grey at each side of the parting:

„Kate realized that she was standing still, staring; had been for some minutes. The men took no notice of her.

The fact that they didn't suddenly made her angry. She walked away out of sight, and there, took off her jacket – Maureen's – showing her fitting dark dress. She tied her hair dramatically with a scarf. Then she strolled back in front of the workmen, hips conscious of themselves. A storm of whistles, calls, invitations. Out of sight the other way, she made her small transformation and walked back again: the men glanced at her, did not see her. She was trembling with rage: it was a rage, it seemed to her, that she had been suppressing for a lifetime. And it was a front for a worse, a misery that she did not want to answer, for it was saying again and again: This is what you have been doing for years and years and years." (The Summer Before the Dark, p. 213-214)

Conclusions

Lessing's novel presents middle age as a time of terrible struggle, of agonizing reappraisal of the past, of recognition that, after the torment of stripping away pretences, one must face "the dark." The imagery of hair, the silken strands which snare the opposite sex, appears again and again through the story. The choice for Kate, the only moral choice Lessing gives her, is to abandon the artifices of youthfulness, to let her hair be grey, to face

herself, to be old. In examining the past Kate realizes that the pressures of social expectations have constrained her, have allowed her to be less than she could have been. Youth-lovely, smooth-limbed, rosy-skinned youth has been wasted. And the future is dark.[8]

Lessing depicts middle age as a crisis point, as a time of reckoning, of coming to terms with the past, as a transition. This transition, this crossing over from one stage of life to another, leads into a darker, grimmer place than the one left long behind. Old age holds little hope. Only youth held promise. And that is gone. [9]

„The Summer Before the Dark, had you not already guessed, isn't exactly a cheery or pleasurable read, but it's an enlightening one. I suspect it would make a rather good book group read, because it throws up so many topics for discussion, many of which are still relevant*"* [10] more than 50 years after it was written.

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[9] Morris, Monica, 1977, **An excursion into Creative Sociology,** *Chapter 5, The Social meaning of Aging,* New York: Columbia University Press, p. 137

[10] **The Summer Before the Dark' by Doris Lessing – Reading Matters**