

# Doris Lessing's Socio- political Consciousness

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**Abstract**— *Doris Lessing's socio-political consciousness refers to liberal and progressive outlook on life. She also got interested in communist ideology and became politically involved like the intellectuals of Salisbury who were filled with Marxist idealism. She was impressed by the ideals of the Royal Air Force personals and she contact with them. She experienced the Second World War through her father as it was divided in two groups American and European block. The social and political changes in Great Britain gave rise to the myth of classlessness, which was widely accepted. Domestic peace, colonial retraction and the Cold War on international level, led to the de-politicization of intellectual life. Lessing was one of the founder members and helped organize the first march protesting against nuclear weapons. Her involvement with these developments was primarily as an increasingly well-established, even celebrated writer.*

**Keywords**— *Lessing's Socio-political consciousness, Doris Lessing's socio-political, consciousness, Political consciousness in novels of Lessing, Social, consciousness of Lessing, Study of consciousness in Lessing's novel.*

The mostly writers of the thirties was certainly strongly inspired by Karl Marx, and it gave a positive vital force to their writings. In the thirties this tendency towards the Left was not confined only to the English writers. Intellectuals all over the world were drawn towards communism as a panacea for the ills of mankind. Andre Gide and Andre Malraux (France), Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann (Germany), Ignazio Silone (Italy), Relf Fox (England), Howard Fast (America), Mulk Raj Anand (India), were all for the “proletariat” and communist ideals. Karl Marx was the source of inspiration for their writings.

The Englishmen with known sympathy towards communism during the World War II, serving in the Royal Air Force, brought with them to Southern Rhodesia what was then the first Marxist idealism of the thirties. This sympathy precipitated alien influence into the settler society of Southern Rhodesia and disturbed its ingrown conservatism. The Royal Air Force personals that formed a distinct group were a completely new element in the claustrophobic Rhodesian society. These personals were quite untouched by the attitude typical of an outnumbered “superior race”. They were the torchbearers to the society and the most appealing new western faith.

Doris Lessing was influenced by her father and developed a liberal and progressive outlook on life. She had drifted away from the dominant white settler culture and white Rhodesian nationalist identity founded on new myths and the enforced feeling of apartheid. Lessing's liberal attitude resulted in her rapid politicization when she came to Salisbury at the end of nineteen thirties. Doris Lessing also got interested in communist ideology and became politically involved like the intellectuals of Salisbury. What was important for her at that moment was the overlapping of communism and radical, liberal humanism. She was impressed by the ideals of the Royal Air Force personals and she contact with them brought her in the communist fold. She remarks:

When I became political and communist, it was because they were the only people I had ever met, who had fought the color bar in their lives. Very few did not the Labour Party... not the liberals...and not 19 the members of the churches. But when you joined the communists, you met, for the first time, people of other races and on equal terms. (Going Home 311)

Doris Lessing linked to the group of progressive intellectuals in Salisbury herself. They were not well organized but these

intellectuals filled with Marxist idealism. The Marxist had not evolved any common practical program and comprised scattered individuals. She was very isolated in the prevailing social and cultural climate. Lessing says to this in one of her interviews:

There was a time in my life when I was a member of a Communist Party which was pure – they had no contact with any kind of reality. It must have been blessed by Lenin from the grave, it was so pure... for a period about three years, a group of enormously idealistic and most intellectual people created a Communist Party in vacuum, which no existing Communist Party anywhere in the World would have recognized as such... It was speculatively rootless. (Lessing's Interview by Florence Howe in *Contemporary Literature* 425)

When she was a member of a communist party all were blessed by Lenin. Though Political situation took a new turn in Southern Rhodesia Doris Lessing had, however, left for England at that time. The political validity and effectiveness of the communists, however, rapidly decimated with the banning of the Communist Party in South Africa and later with the growth of the black nationalists and Labour Movement there in the fifties.

Doris Lessing leaves for England to sustain her ambition as a writer. The Second World War had ended four years back but the world was getting divided in American and European block on one side and the Russian block on the other. While America was expanding its influence through alliances like NATO and SEATO, Russia was penetrating the countries of the world through its communist ideology with emphasis on a complex of economic, political and cultural forces. The cold war was generally escalating between the two blocks. Lessing felt the impact of this changing political scenario during her stay in England.

It was a very tough task to Doris Lessing for survival as a writer in England. She was a divorcee with a child to look after. She was without any significant financial security and sources of livelihood. Her situation therefore did not permit her much scope for political involvement. Though she gradually established herself as a writer and joined communist Party of England. She appealed to party head for a number of years strongly to the intellectuals and writers of England.

Many British intellectuals had fought for the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil war and half of the British killed in the war had been communists. In 1952 she visited the Soviet Union as a party member. She helped the editor of a magazine 'The New Reasoner'. In This magazine, some of her short stories appeared that was founded outside the official communist Party.

The Labour Government had been swept into office in 1945 on a wave of popular radicalism. It led to full-scale social and economic change in England. There was a time to full employment and the development and expansion of the Welfare State. Doris Lessing settled in England but the myth of England as the citadel of radical liberalism, as seen by the colonials, was soon dissipated. The immediate post-war radicalism was quickly diffused when the Conservatives were re-elected to power in 1951 and stayed in the position of authority for the next thirteen years. The conservatives worked hard and established their role as entrepreneurs of economic expansion, managers of the mixed economy and proclaimers of a new Britisher.

The social changes in Britain have given rise to the myth of classlessness, which was widely accepted. Domestic peace, colonial retraction and the Cold War on international level, led to the de-politicization of intellectual life. The dissatisfaction with communism of the senior intellectuals had come to the lime-light in the confessions published in *The God That Failed*. The later writings of George Orwell have further added to this reaction against the totalitarian communist regime of Russia. It was loudly proclaimed by the *Angry Young Men*. They expressed their views through their writings in *The Declaration*. Osborne, Lessing and Kingsley Amis were some of the main contributors of this paper.

The late fifties witnessed the development of a broadly based antinuclear movement, CDN. Lessing was one of the founder members and helped organize the first march protesting against nuclear weapons. Her involvement with these developments was primarily as an increasingly well-established, even celebrated writer. Her collection of stories entitled five had already won the Somerset Maugham Memorial Prize for her. She was marked out from contemporary communist intellectuals, as a woman of talents and as a literary figure. She was a largely self-taught writer, living almost entirely on the proceeds of her writing rather than working freelance in television or journalism, and existing completely outside any educational institution. She was an unusual figure both in and outside the left. However, it was also her connection with the communist movement and

its aesthetic and political traditions via Rhodesia that gave her a position as an intellectual. Though a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Lessing shared fully a stray spirit of individualism present in the Party. In 1956, for instance, a short – lined unofficial communist periodical dedicated to a greater variety of opinion was published with Lessing as one of its chief contributors. When the Communist Party of Great Britain continued repeating the Stalinist line and defending Soviet intervention after Hungarian revolt in October, 1956, Lessing and many others left the party for good, and creating a crisis in the party.

While her first novel *The Grass is Singing* and African stories reflect Lessing's colonial concern, *The Golden Notebook* is woven around political themes, more specifically communism. The enthusiasm for communism appears a natural evolution in the context of Lessing's deep-rooted radical liberal humanist vision of life. Even before her vision was firmly grounded in humanitarianism, she discerned the seeds of her liberal radical humanism in the ideology of communism and was naturally drawn to it. She embraced communism not merely as a political ideology but a means to an end – to achieve socio-political consciousness.

Martha, the heroine of *Children of Violence*, acquires political consciousness in its first book, *Martha Quest*, politics does not figure prominently in this part. Joss Cohen introduces her to the Left Book Club where on reading a Left Wing periodical for the first time, she finds in it confirmation of ideas she has been defending vaguely and in a casual manner. Though she wavers in her choice between Douglas and Cohen brothers as her life partner, she decides in favor of Douglas Knowell. It is, however, clear in her mind that she has to devote herself to political activities. This is why even she marries Douglas; she has an inkling that she might have to leave him because of his apathy towards politics.

In the second novel of the series *A Proper Marriage*, Martha's marital relations with Douglas, are put increasingly under stress, despite the birth of the daughter Caroline, because of her growing involvement in political activities. During wartime the arrival of numerous R.A.F. personals in the city, committed to Marxist idealism, leads many left wingers like Martha to think more seriously about advocating an end to the 'color bar'. Martha turns for advice to Joss and Solly's cousin Jasmine. They counsel her to leave her husband and child because of her imperative need for developing her personality through her genuine interest

in politics. She therefore decides to leave her husband and daughter for this greater cause.

Doris Lessing reads about the Russian revolution for the first time and under goes a miraculous change in her life. She is completely transformed. She feels as if her eyes are opened, and ears made to hear; it is like a rebirth. For the first time she discovers a purpose in her life, an ideal to live for. Her sense of moving swiftly from the stifling situation of marriage and motherhood to the thrilling horizon of political freedom is conveyed through her epiphany expressed in the forceful Biblical rhetoric.

Her father attributes her socialist passion to a disease natural to her age. Martha, however, gets deeply entrenched in Left activities and through her reading of the Left's activities and through her reading of the Leftist papers, acquires a clear vision of humanism inherent in Communist ideology. Armed with facts as revealed in *The New Statesman*, she engages in her first argument while working as a secretary. She firmly declares that it is France, not the Republicans who are the real reactionaries and rebels in Spain.

Martha, who leads separation from her husband Douglas, decides to join the Communist Party in Rhodesia. She says to William, an airman: "look, you don't have to flannel, like this. If there is a Communist group, I want to join it." (Lessing *A Proper Marriage* 547) She was disappointed to learn that there is no organized Communist Party there. But after some time, the Communist Party comes into existence in Rhodesia with the efforts of Anton who has been a communist since 1933 and his friend Andrew. Martha joins the group as its member but feels upset by crevasses in it. There is tension between Silly Cohen and his cousin Jasmine for ideology of Trotsky and Stalin. The Trotskyists have little common and were hostile themselves.

It was remarkable fact that none of the girl knows what a Trotskyist was; they had accepted it as a term of abuse. For that matter, they knew nothing about Trotsky, except that he had tried to wreck the Russian Revolution. (Lessing *A Ripple From the Storm* 42)

The novel, *A Ripple from the Storm*, describes the communist activities in South Rhodesia. Martha was involved in such activities with several men and women and these people were dedicated communist and Jewish refugee Anton Hesse, whom she marries to save from deportation as

an alien enemy. In one of his admirable speeches Anton Hesse gives a very impressive outline of Marxist history:

Comrades, this is the dawn of human history. We have the supreme good fortune and the responsibility to believing at a time when mankind takes the first great step forward from the barbarity and chaos of unplanned production to the sunlight of socialism from the boyhood of our species to its manhood. Upon us, upon people like us, all over the world, the organized members of the communist party depend on the future of mankind the future of our species. (Lessing *A Ripple From the Storm* 42)

He further says:

The motives of men making history in the past were often good; but the ideology of reformers often had no connection with what they actually accomplished; this is the first time in history that men can accomplish what they mean to accomplish; for Marxism is a key to the understanding of phenomena; we, in our epoch, seemed to that terrible process, shown for instance in the French Revolution when men went to their deaths in thousands for noble ends – in their case, liberty, fraternity and equality, when what they were actually doing was To destroy. For the first time consciousness and accomplishment are linked, go hand in hand, supplement each other. (Doris Lessing *A Ripple From the Storm* 42)

While Anton's eloquent speech enthralls Martha, it falls flat on the working-class airmen, who fail to understand his high sounding rhetoric. The great virtues and high perfection as envisaged by Anton for an ideal communist are well high impossible to be attained by any man. Even Anton, though a dedicated communist, fails to come up to these ideals. Anton appears to be concerned more about theoretical principles of Marxism than to their implementation in practical life for the immediate good of the people.

Maisie, one of the girls in the group, puts forward a commonsense criticism pointing out that there is no chance of implementing the plan, since the Communists are not even contesting the elections. The group, however, disintegrates because most of them come to realize that its function is purely theoretical. Antony and Martha group comes to be known as that of militants. It turns a very small group and is

least effective. The other is of the moderates – the socialists – who form a social democratic group to help the native Africans as much as possible under the existing social structure and the Labour Party.

Before leaving for England Martha feels a little disillusioned with communism as she comes to know about certain shocking facts about high handedness of the Stalinist regime in Russia through an unnamed book by Timothy Gangin, a Russian peasant who became a minor government official following the 1917 Russian revolution and who, after being imprisoned for some years, migrated to America and wrote books denouncing the Soviet Union:

Martha read it. If this was true then everything she had been saying for the past seven years was a lie. But perhaps it was exaggerated?—after all, a man imprisoned unjustly was bound to be bitter and to exaggerate? That word exaggerates it rang false... She thought : I feel something is true, as if I'm not even reading the words of the book, but responding to something else, well, the yardsticks I would use, would say : yes, this is true. One has an instinct one trusts, yes... Martha gave the book to Anton at first he said, "I'm not going to read this trash." But he read it.... and said, "After all they aren't saints; they were bound to make 31 mistakes. And off he went to the Forsten. (Lessing *Landlocked* 486)

The book, however, creates agitation in the mind of workers. Martha also, though silent and neutral, feels a little disenchanted. She is further shocked when just before leaving for England, she learns from her colleague Mrs. Van that the evils of communism have never been a secret for her.

The last novel, *The Four-Gated City*, in the *Children of Violence* series, is very long and spans over a period of approximately fifty years. The concluding portion is in the form of prophecy as her mature consciousness experiences the need for people to have a higher working of the mind, through which humanity can proceed to a higher level of evolution. She realizes that social changes are not possible without inner change.

In the company of Coleridge Martha comes in contact with the changing political and social scenario of the forties, the fifties and the sixties. She looks at the various trends of the



outer world – transition, movements, communism, the cold war, the shocks of Suez and Hungary, Stalin's death in the mid-fifties and the growing dissatisfaction among the Leftists – with discerning and critical eye. She is unable to escape the role of the Labour Party in England as an alternative of communism. She meets Coleridge's sister, Phoebe, a member of the Labour Party, who also believes in the dissolution of classes in the society but suspects Communists to be dangerous fanatics. After taking an overall view of the political situation, Martha, however, comes to the conclusion that "if she were to be political, communism was nearer her mark than Labour in its various degrees." (Lessing *The Four-Gated City* 80)

The novel then moves into prophecy for which Lessing has earlier prepared readers. She imagines and foresees that the political events and the increasing cold war might lead to nuclear holocaust, resulting in the birth of mutants after the accident. Some of these mutants would display telepathic power. One such child, Joseph, tells Martha that one day whole human race will be like him, and advanced evolutionary form replacing all previous inadequate forms. The emphasis on the Sufi view shows that people must first change the inner consciousness before bringing about social and economic changes. Martha thus shows a clear-cut shift from the Marxist view, which lays emphasis on social change as a necessary condition for the progress of mankind. She thus abandons all hopes of finding a solution through collective political action.

The *Golden Notebook*, which was published in 1962, between the publication of *Ripple from the Storm* and *Landlocked* of *Children of Violence* series, is also concerned with politics in its first section entitled "The Red Notebook". The novel consists of four sections named "Black", "Red", "Yellow", and finally "Golden". "The Red Notebook" has a precise date of January 1, 1950. It shows the heroine Anna's and also of her creator Lessing's firm commitment to communism. The title itself suggests Lessing's leanings towards the Leftist politics.

There is an obvious autobiographical element in *The Golden Notebook*. The heroine Anna Wulf, like Martha Quest, represents the author Doris Lessing herself. Doris Lessing, however, does not only reveal her subtle shifting of loyalty to communism through Anna Wulf's fuller character portrayal but also depicts the circumstances and later stages which lead to further political metamorphosis in her life. Ruth Whittaker observes in this regard.

The *Red Notebook* is mainly to do with Anna's experiences with the British Communist Party for 1950-57, her growing unease with it, and her final extrication from it. (Doris Lessing 67)

Anna, a person with integrity, can only project; she cannot change a deteriorating situation. After the death of Stalin in 1953, Anna looks for a meaningful allegiance to communism. Her renewed sense of purpose in the communist party is, however, short-lived for she discovers that the situation, she had sensed earlier, and which had led to her dissatisfaction with the party, has not changed at all. Talking to Jack, a party member, Anna explains her reason for both becoming a communist and for leaving the Party:

Alienation being split it's the moral side, so to speak, of the communist message. And suddenly you shrug your shoulders and say because the mechanical basis of our lives is getting complicated, we must be content to not even try to understand things as a whole... (297)

Anna joins the communist party because of a need for wholeness, for an end to the split, divided, unsatisfactory way to live in. When it fails to make her achieve this objective she leaves it and moves to another commitment. As an enlightened liberal White, Anna cannot assimilate the inconsistencies and pettiness of communism, and moves towards an area of sex and marriage and concurrently her need for psychoanalytic counseling.

*The Good Terrorist* (1985) marks the end of Doris Lessing's concern for the political commitment as begun in *Martha Quest*. It is not because she loses hope and faith in politics as an effective means of change in man's predicament. Dorothy Melling in *The Good Terrorist* knows that for the members of communist center Union, the change simply means "how to get power for you." (Lessing *The Good Terrorist* 330)

Dorothy's words carry weight, because she too has been a communist, and her ire is not directed only at Alice, but at a friend and contemporary Zoe. The activities of the misguided terrorists are self-destructive. That is what happens when explosive loaded car kills Faye and injures Jasper seriously. Communists apparently supporting the cause of a

united Ireland were exploiting the youths for their own ends.

The novella, *The Temptation of Jack Orkney*, reveals the extreme type of dissatisfaction with political activities. It does not have as its characters idealistic communists who work around for the party even though they know about Stalin's excesses. Its characters are the most generous and forward-looking progressives of the seventies. Orkney realizes that all of their labour will accomplish nothing:

What he could not endure was that his son, all of them would have to make the identical journey he had his contemporaries had made, to learn exactly the same lessons as if they'd never been learned 41 before .....That humanity was unable to learn from experience was written there for everyone to see. (Lessing *Collected African Stories* Vol.2 274-75)

In a series of lectures collected in her work entitled *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, Doris Lessing recounts the reason that initially attracted her towards communism, and after a brief period, led her to leave it. She remarks:

I went through a period of being a communist. It was a conversion apparently sudden and short-lived. Communism was in fact a germ or virus that had already been at working me for a long time. It was because of my rejections of the repressive and unjust society of old White dominated Africa. We believe that when the war would be over, everyone would recognize the blessings of communism and the world would be communist. It would be without class, race or sex prejudices. Everyone would be living in harmony, love, plenty of peace forever. (*Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* 28)

She, however, realized that the promises of an utopia made during the war time were all false: "Communism, has turned out so badly, proved itself not only one of the bloodiest tyrannies but also so inefficient that any type of regime no matter how bad, is preferred to it." (30) In 1967, she had believed that the communist countries, save for China had all become much more democratic. Lessing, who like so many idealists considered communism as a panacea for the world's economic and social ills, was disenchanted after some years of allegiance.

## CONCLUSION

Lessing has showed the socio-political changes during her stay in England and she also felt the impact of political activities and joined Communist Party. The social and political changes in Great Britain gave rise to the myth of classlessness, which was widely accepted. Though she gradually established herself as a writer but the political impact can be seen in many ways as the impact of Russian revolution changed her life and she completely transformed as her eyes are opened, and ears made to hear; it was like a rebirth for her.

The concluding portion is in the form of paper as her mature consciousness experiences the need for people to have a higher working of the mind, through which humanity can proceed to a higher level of evolution. She realizes that social changes are not possible without inner change and believed that our society must be without class, race or sex prejudices and live in harmony with plenty of peace, love, forever.

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