

DORIS LESSING REDEFINES THE FRONT: THE (UN) COMMON PLACES OF WAR*

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“I want to explain what it is like to be a human being in a century when you open your eyes on war”.

“Interview with Doris Lessing”, Roy Newquist [1963]

“... last night I had known, finally, that the truth for our time was war, the immanence of war”.

The Golden Notebook

“Every fibre of Martha’s body, everything she thought, every movement she made, everything she was, was because she had been born at the end of one world war, and had spent all her adolescence in the atmosphere of preparations for another”.

Landlocked

Can women and war occupy the same space, even on paper? They seem natural enemies, polar elements that cannot interact. Men, we have been told, belong on the battlefield and women at home; men are killers, women are caretakers. Yet in recent years feminist critics have been deconstructing these conventionally perceived separate spheres (e.g., Enloe, Elshtain, Gilbert, Gubar, Hanley, Higonnet, Reardon, Scott). Women are still not where decisions about war and peace are made, but more and more of them are talking about their present and historical relationship to war. For them, talk about war is no longer a male preserve. Perhaps that change is best imbedded in the brilliant punning title of

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Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's new work in progress, *No Man's Land*, which points in a number of directions —toward that grim for-men-only stretch of land between enemy trenches in World War I and, of course, toward women's exclusion, but also toward her full participation in a world(s) of her own making.

These new perspectives make the obvious about Doris Lessing even more obvious. She is a war novelist, although she has not so far been described as one. The two world wars are at the center of her life and of her major female protagonists, Martha Quest and Anna Wulf. The two historical wars of our time are major parameters in the Martha Quest quintet and in *The Golden Notebook*. World War II is also in the background of *Retreat to Innocence* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*; another kind of war exists in *Memoirs of a Survivor* and in *The Good Terrorist*; the story "Report from the Threatened City" seems like notes toward post-*Four-Gated City* fiction. World War II is a crucial event in two Canopus volumes, *Shikasta* and *The Sirian Experiments*. Imagined wars are equally crucial in the lives of Al:Ith of *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* and of Ambien II, the Sirian troubleshooter/galactic negotiator.

An article on Doris Lessing and war can only "open", it cannot "cover", its subject.¹ It can also add yet one more way of seeing Lessing's work to those multiple perspectives that already exist. I will argue here that Lessing is both conventional and the radical in her presentation of war in the Martha Quest novels and that she does not seriously question war ideologies until *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *Landlocked* (1965). Another kind of seismic change, therefore, occurs in these two novels which are generally recognized to mark a distinct shift in Lessing's fictional practice (e.g., Draine, Fishburn, Greene, Jouve, Knapp, Rubenstein, Sprague).

Although the Martha Quest quintet did not, at first, have a series title, its acquired one speaks to the centrality of war. Lessing calls her contemporaries the Children of Violence; by violence, she means the socially acceptable violence of war. Canopeans speak of earth's twentieth century as the Century of Destruction. To conflate the two quintets for a moment, we Children of Violence who live in the Century of Destruction are making, from Lessing's point of view, a third world war inevitable. At the same time, Lessing believes that war is permanent in our time, as she demonstrates most strongly in *The Golden Notebook*, *The Four-Gated City*, *Shikasta*, and *The Sirian Experiments*.

Lessing's depiction of war and its effect on women and men wears at least a double face. The first two volumes of the Martha Quest novels illustrate the contention that war polarizes gender roles, making women more "feminine" and men more "masculine". Martha doesn't join the

army, and scornfully rejects the Red Cross when she has to submit to a class on proper bed-making; she never thinks of becoming a nurse like her mother (but Alice Burrell, her friend and double, becomes one for her).² The option of becoming Rosie the Riveter simply didn't exist in Southern Rhodesia. Martha participates in the traditional ways —by marrying on the eve of war, having a baby, drinking, dating and dancing with soldiers.

Mr. Maynard, functioning as a point-of-view character, makes the devastating connection between war and marriage for the reader, defining the four more weddings he will perform “on a warm Thursday afternoon in the month of March, 1939, in the capital city of a British colony in the center of the great African continent” (*MQ* 246) as “a first infection from that brutal sentimentality which poisons us all in time of war” (*MQ* 247). In *A Proper Marriage* Martha herself will say to Maynard, “I got married because there's going to be a war. Surely that's a good enough reason” (59). War may open up jobs normally closed to women. At the same time, marriages and babies do, in fact, escalate in time of war.

Douglas Knowell, Martha's first husband, so eager to see battle, joins up immediately with his buddies. Both Douglas and Martha play roles the war fever requires, he “the young hero off to the wars for adventure”, she “the ancient female voice” (*PM* 68). Martha's unthinking fall into marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth is more crucial and more typical than she is aware of. It brings her into the community of women which is implicitly set against the comradeship of men in wartime. Douglas experiences his “crisis of masculinity” sooner than Martha experiences her “crisis of femininity”. He never leaves Africa, never sees battle, and is soon discharged because of his ulcer. He cannot confront his physical incapacity or change his conception of male behavior. He accepts the myth that combat is the only real participation in war. He is, ultimately, as much a victim of polarized sexual expectations as is Martha. Like Alfred Quest before him, Douglas idealizes his stint in the army, lamenting: “never again would he know the comradeship of men. Never. Never” (*PM* 224).

Lessing begins to radically re-read sex roles in wartime in *A Ripple from the Storm*, the third volume in her first quintet, for in that volume she validates radical politics as a form of wartime participation for women. Unlike women's classic “caretaking” participations —as camp followers who were often also nurses, wives, or prostitutes— radical political action is potentially critical of war and of women's subordination. It creates a context which permits Martha Quest to free herself from a bad marriage. That her radical participation precipitates her into a worse second marriage, or that sexism rages behind male lip service to women's equality does not erase the originality of Lessing's validation of radical politics as a wartime participation.

Ripple is also special in its depiction of civil disruption caused by a hot war that rages elsewhere. The flood of Royal Air Force personnel seem so alien and overpowering, they are even likened to “occupation troops” (235). This simultaneously exhilarating and destructive “British invasion” (240) imparts to some layers of society in this provincial colonial African capital a patina of cosmopolitanism and political radicalism. Once again, a Maynard is used to depict the underside of things. The social and economic advantages and excitements the RAF influx generates also endanger local racist mores. Fearful of fraternization between black and white, Mrs. Maynard organizes the canteen where Martha and her war widow friends spend their evenings dancing and drinking. The establishment of the canteen passes for a patriotic act; Mrs. Maynard knows better. She is acting to maintain the color line.

Zambesia (Rhodesia/Zimbabwe) is defined as a ripple from the storm of World War II. This metaphor could be taken to indicate Lessing’s implication in the myth that only combat is genuine wartime participation. It is true that the use of Stalingrad as a touchstone indicates Martha’s sense that she is far from the historical center of World War II. Yet the touchstone metaphor binds as least as much as it separates, for, like so much feminist writing, it unites the political and the personal. The distant sounds of the Battle of Stalingrad, still considered the turning point of the war in Europe, finally coincide with the local storm that is the metaphor for the reality of Martha’s inner life. (The Battle of Stalingrad is also where Martha locates her political birth [LL 81]).

The Golden Notebook can be described as a novel that imbeds the dialectic of war into heterosexual relationships. “The logic of war” (589) that governs the Anna/Saul relationship parallels the public wars they read about daily. As Anne Mulkeen long ago pointed out, “Actual war, hot or cold, is going on somewhere in the world in the background of every event mentioned in the book, from the 1940s on” (268). Furthermore, the colossal incongruity of asking blacks in Rhodesia to support the war against Hitler is confronted in *The Golden Notebook* before and more directly than it is in the Children of Violence series. Anna Wulf knows that “the whole of that enormous land mass [Africa]... was conducted precisely on Hitler’s assumption—that some human beings are better than others because of their race” (65). Anna and her friends also know that the irony of the white “basses” rushing off to fight “against a creed they would all die to defend on their own soil” is not lost on black Africans (65).

But in *The Golden Notebook* Anna has a private victory. She comes to recognize the violence within her that women have been socialized to ignore. She is finally able to internalize the principle of destruction. Instead of locating that principle in Saul and in her other men, Anna is at

last able to see that she is cannibal as well as victim. This is a remarkable achievement. But can she hold a gun? Yes, metaphorically and at a remove—when the complex transforming power of dream breaks through the restraints of consciousness. In Anna's dream, the movie cameras which are televising her novel, *Frontiers of War*, turn into machine guns (GN 524-5). Cameras and guns are metamorphic weapons which must be identified as versions of Anna's pen. That pen, paradoxically and always both unlike and like a sword, makes Anna a freer woman.

At the same time, Anna's novel contains many examples of stereotypically gendered roles. One of the most obvious exists in the two lines Anna and Saul give to each other. We have been so busy noticing the collaborative nature of their exchange of first lines that we have not noticed how classically gendered they are. Saul gives Anna: "The two women were alone in the London flat" (639). She gives him: "On a dry hillside in Algeria, a soldier watched the moonlight glinting on his rifle" (640). No one seems to have noticed the gendered nature of the Anna/Saul exchange and its embodiment of separate spheres for women and men. It repeats the old message—men fight in the field and women talk at home—but the exchange of lines also undercuts that message or at least complicates it by having the woman devise the male line and the man devise the female line.

The Martha Quest of *Landlocked* is a new person who comments and interprets, feels and meditates in ways that make her more like Anna Wulf than like the earlier Martha Quest (see Jouve, Greene). We need to remind ourselves that this Martha arrives onstage chronologically later than Anna Wulf. *Landlocked* is almost as different from its predecessors as is *The Four-Gated City*. Part of that difference resides in its emotive confrontation of the post-war world. The world of *Landlocked*, though early suffused with love, is soon suffused with death. Thanatos drives out Eros in this remarkable study of post-war disillusion.³

Although *Landlocked* does not question the racist contradictions of World War II as explicitly as *The Golden Notebook* does and can be said to sustain female stereotypes, it is perhaps the best example of Lessing's erasure of the conventional boundaries between war and peace, front and rear. Part of that erasure inevitably undercuts the myth that war casualties occur only on the battlefield. Four men die, all of them after the war: Alfred Quest, Athen Gouliamis, Thomas Stern, Johnny Lindsay. Their deaths are private events that mirror post-war disasters. The atomic bomb comes more and more to seem an early indicator of the nature of the "peace" that follows it. With the hot war officially over, the cold war mercilessly erodes the comradeship between different ideologies that the war made possible. Only Thomas believes the war isn't over on VE day. His creator agrees with him. Lessing's astute decision to show VE day

from the point of view of May Quest who is still nursing her long ago wounded and now dying husband bypasses the hoopla of celebration and concentrates instead on two victims of World War I, victims who passed their war onto and into their daughter. This decision so insists on the connection between the two wars that they seem continuous, certainly imaginatively. Perhaps even in fact, for a list of the European and Asian wars that preceded the invasion of Poland on September 1st, 1939 —the accepted beginning date of World War II— makes the two wars seem like one long war. Mrs. Quest interprets the invitation tendered to Alfred Quest to attend the VE Day ceremonies and to receive a medal as belated official recognition that his illnesses are “the result of the first World War” (63). But Mr. Quest is too ill to attend. There is no victory celebration in the novel. Lessing chooses to define VE Day as a non-event.

The other three deaths in the novel tell us the same thing. None occurs on a battlefield, yet each can be described as a war casualty. Thomas Stern's need to act out his anguish, despair and rage at evil in the universe (and perhaps his own survivor guilt) among blacks far away from white settlements recalls and rewrites a figure like Kurtz in “Heart of Darkness”. Thomas as the Wandering Jew, homeless, hunted, haunted, alien-ated, typifies the exilic character of our time. Athen, the eponymous communist hero, dies in prison in a royalist post-war Greece torn by Civil War. The presentation of Alfred, Thomas, and Athen as war casualties demonstrates that the battlefield is not the only place to die a war death, and that wars have effects beyond the dates of their historical closure. Athen is an idealized communist warrior. Johnny Lindsay is an idealized labor unionist who dies amid the chaos of the first general strike in Zambesia. But he too can be counted as a war casualty, for the civil strife that marks the strike and other cold war events has the bellicosity of war and its potential for death.

That Lessing chooses four such men and four such deaths is significant. Her choices undercut the conventional definition of war casualty. Only background male figures, Maisie Gale's first two husbands among them, die in the war proper.⁴ The deaths of her husbands serve to develop Maisie as a version of the historical camp follower. The parents of the man who fathered her child think of her as a prostitute. In Maisie, the historical equivalence of war-connected women with prostitution is inscribed. Later, when Maisie is living alone and bringing up her daughter above the bar at which she waits tables, she is authorially defined as promiscuous if not as a prostitute since she accepts money from her sexual partners. Of Martha's female peers, Maisie is the most conventional, the one who would have been happiest as a wife and mother, and she is, significantly, the woman most destroyed by the war. Neither Martha, nor Jasmine Cohen, nor Stella Mathews, nor Marjorie

Black, nor Alice Burrell, nor Marie DuPreez are so role-stereotyped and so negatively redefined by the war.

The women in the novel do not die. More pertinent, their fates lack the richness and variety Lessing allots to her male characters. Theirs are significantly more conventional. All save Jasmine enact variations on the traditional wife/mother/lover female roles. Only she makes a genuine wartime marriage of convenience (to acquire South African citizenship). Maisie's (to Andrew McGrew), and Martha's (to Anton Hesse) are illusory or pseudo-marriages of convenience. Perhaps her special kind of integrity earns Jasmine the privilege of closing the novel with that wonderful cry, "'Barricades!'" In the context of the novel, that cry, the serio-comic cry of comrades who look forward to the proletarian revolution, is more elegiac than martial, more nostalgic than predictive.

The men die and the women live. But in the war outside the novel, women and children died with men in air raids and concentration camps. The atomic bombs were not dropped on military targets, yet "the myth of a protected war zone for women and children" still survives (Hanley 18). Lessing's women are, of course, behaviorally affected by the war. They also present another most unexpected kind of wound. In a counterpoint akin to the one between female community in childbirth and male comradeship in war, Lessing implicitly compares the eternal alteration of the woman's body in childbirth with the wounding and dying of men in wartime. Martha rages when men look at her body as though it were an art object and resents the doctor who oversees it after marriage. After childbirth, although she feels "no more than a pang for the lost perfection" of her body (*PM* 136), she records its passing: "It was gone, that brief flowering" (*PM* 136). This alteration, occurring as it does within the context of war, echoically foregrounds the woman's recurring "wounds" and validates her unique "battlefield".

Landlocked is exceptional in its extended direct didactic meditation on the meaning of war and violence. For some six pages Martha talks with an absent Thomas, one of her numerous other selves, about the second world war (191-7). Two years after the war (1947) "cities still stood in ruins and people in the cities expected a hungry winter" (191). Martha focuses on the famines and wars in Europe and the luck that allows her to live on a full-stomach in a city "whole and peopled" (191). War is murder on the colossal scale of forty million dead, a figure Martha cannot take in. These pages confront the discrepancy between Martha's belief in non-violence and her actual life, for "Martha was the essence of violence, she had been conceived, bred, fed and reared on violence" (195). Despite the overwhelming testimony of her life, Martha continues to argue with Thomas: "What use is it, Thomas, what use is violence?" (195). She exemplifies the position so often argued and so often questioned that

women espouse non-violence or are unable to act violently even when they have known violence all their lives.

The terms, “conceived, bred, fed and reared”, are neither metaphoric nor casually chosen; they are literal. As someone reared between the two world wars, Martha is a paradigmatic child of violence:

That couple in there, that man and that woman, when they conceived me, one was in shellshock from the war, and the other in breakdown from nursing its wounded. She, Martha, was as much a child of the 1914-1918 war as she was of Alfred Quest, May Quest (196).⁵

For Martha, violence, clearly social and sanctioned, manifests itself through what we call war—that most extreme mode of resolving polarities.

The withdrawal from politics signalled in *Landlocked* continues in *The Four-Gated City*. This simultaneously remarkably exciting, remarkably overblown novel, could, unfortunately, be considered a denial of everything Martha has become by the end of *Landlocked*. A mature Martha accepts a level of domestic involvement more engulfing than her previous roles in the Wisdom and Hesse households as the female caretaker /surrogate mother/wife of a large adopted family. Separate spheres appear to have re-surfaced as public action is allotted to men like Mark, Colin and Arthur Coldridge, and private action to women like Martha Quest and Lynda Coldridge. (Women who prefer the kind of political activity Martha once embraced, Phoebe Coldridge or Patty Cohen, are cut down.) Wars go on “outside” while Martha’s inner immigration is finally validated as the way to a new world. Martha, Lynda and other seers and hearers form the nucleus of the new world after Catastrophe. Public modes of power fail; private modes of power, inner/natural/female, will at last become public power. Lessing’s idealized position is clear, but is it convincing?

Like the other Martha Quest novels, *The Four-Gated City* is at once conventional and radical. The traditional female roles the novel displays coexist with a powerful critique of eurocentric conceptions of war accepted in the earlier novels. This Martha has learned one lesson well; she knows that wars are always going on, cold or hot, declared or not. When they are going on in small, non-white, so-called remote areas, the Western world thinks peace exists. Yet even Martha hears herself say before she can stop herself that there will “probably be another war again” (170), forgetting that “A war *was* going on, at that moment, in yet another place no one had heard of before there was a war. Korea. A nasty

war. If she were a Korean she would not now be saying: There is going to be a war" (170-1). She would know the war was already on.⁶

No single paper can pretend to do justice to the way issues of war, politics, race, and gender intertwine in Lessing's nearly forty year output. The Martha Quest novels stand as an exceptionally rich and original exploration of these issues. These Ur-documents place a woman at the center of the narrative who never lifts a gun on a battlefield, yet who, in her private and political life "is as inscribed by war as any soldier" (Hanley to author, 4/5/88). The protagonist may place herself at the edge of history, but her creator and her reader know better. Martha Quest, like Anna Wulf, is at the center of history.

Recent discussions of women and war provide us with a new perspective on the uses and meaning of politics in Lessing's work. For her, as for other critics, politics and war cannot be separated. Betty Reardon argues, for example, that politics, like war, is "an essentially masculine enterprise" requiring a "ferocity" akin to war (32-33). Politics has a particularly ferocious dimension in *A Ripple from the Storm*.⁷ In other pre-Canopean novels the ferocity of "public" politics is more often confronted in indirect ways—as reverberations from newspaper headlines, for example, but that ferocity and its connection with war are staples in much, if not most, of Lessing's work.

The study of women and war is not an arbitrary enterprise. Because it inevitably problematizes "masculinity" as much as "femininity", questions about war can take us to the heart of sex role expectations and biases to those anxieties and failures both men and women experience and to central issues of social and political policy. The paradoxes of Lessing's treatment of sex roles in wartime recall one of the major paradoxes about war in our time. Nuclear war has not wiped out guerrilla war. The post-nuclear guerrilla wars in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Central America have no clearly defined front, perhaps not even a uniformed army, and their civilian populations are assumed to be and are treated as participants. It is accepted that nuclear war "vaporizes the myth of a protected zone" (Hanley 18), but the guerrilla wars of our time have also lacked a protected zone for civilians. Lessing's erasure of the boundaries between battlefield and homefront, between World War I and World War II, and, more important, of those between war and peace expresses what has been called the *durée* of women's time as opposed to the "sharply defined event" of "masculinist history" (Higonnet and Higonnet 46).

Although Martha, inner violence, like Anna Wulf's, tends to be displaced onto men, the use of Stalingrad as a primary metaphor for the protagonist's inner state does make an effective statement on the complex and unresolved question as to whether women are more pacific than men. Martha's overtly stated position on violence suggests support for the view

that there is a “fundamental (or natural) female antipathy to war” (Scott 24). But the context of that position is filled with irony. Although Anna Wulf, unlike Martha Quest, internalizes her own violence, questions about women and wars both inner and outer are too large and too resistant to warrant closure.

A coda. When Lessing returns to these questions in *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980), her approach is both frontal and fabular. Her familiar polarities, male/female, war/peace, are positioned to break down, interact and re-form. When the novel concludes, the martial male, Ben Ata, is teaching his amazonian second wife the benefits of cooperation, and the peaceful female head of household (now a head of country), Al:Ith, is moving alone into the inner blues of Zone Two. The male has become a pacifist and the female a solitary seeker —and both are still growing and moving in unorthodox directions for which terms like female or male, pacifist or militarist are inadequate. As Ben Ata becomes less war-like, Al:Ith is not becoming more war-like. The two heads of state are not simplistically changing places. Furthermore, since they are rulers, their actions are never merely “private”. They can change worlds as the would-be “world-changers” of the earlier novels could not (GN 624). Martha and Anna did not have the power given to Al:Ith who guides and teaches Ben Ata, initiating a process that transforms them both —and three (perhaps four, if we include Zone Two) peoples and kingdoms. The abandonment/revision of radical politics, well under way in *Landlocked* and completed in *The Four-Gated City*, takes a different shape here.

The once sharply defined boundaries between kingdoms and peoples become permeable and fluid; they do not disappear. *Marriages* modifies but refuses to dissolve difference. It is surely Lessing’s most hopeful meditation on the primal problem of difference which is at the root of conflict and its extreme eruption in war.

Despite their surface realism, Lessing’s post-Canopus novels may be closer to the fabular form of *Marriages* than they are to the earlier novels. Although dressed in the garments of our time, these novels, especially *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983), *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and *The Fifth Child* (1988), raise issues that recall more traditional meditations on the nature of “goodness”. They could even be called religious inquiries. War is not the locus of their exploration of difference. When they turn in whole or in part to social violence, that violence lacks the societal sanction of war. For Lessing, the “real” war of the 80s is the Afghan/Soviet war, a civil war whose superpower intrusion/orchestration has often been compared to the Vietnam/U.S. war. That real war erupts in Lessing’s essays, not in her fiction. (In ironic contrast, superpower [i.e., Canopean] intervention in the “unreal” colonial wars of *Shikasta* and

The Sirian Experiments is “good” for the natives.) *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* (1987) does not advance Lessing’s thinking about war. Its covert function seems to me to lie elsewhere—in Lessing’s need for an objective correlative for her belated and now very passionate anti-communism. Why did she choose to break her long political silence when she did and on behalf of the rebel Afghan cause? Does that choice, or better, does the way she deploys that choice, undercut and evade, as I think it does, the questions that are at the center of her earlier explorations of war? At this point in time, Lessing’s imagination seems profoundly split between didactic journalism about a distant war and dark fictional parables about the nature of good and evil close to home.

Notes

1. Christine Froula uses these useful terms in her review of volume one of Gilbert and Gubar's projected three volume *No Man's Land*, p. 13.
2. In an autobiographical essay Lessing acknowledges what her fictional Martha Quest does not —the radical nature of her mother's decision to become a nurse in World War I. Lessing accepts the family lore, the story her mother told —that instead of choosing the university education her father wanted for her, this “rebellious girl” chose to become a nurse, leaving her father “horrified, utterly overthrown. Middle-class girls did not become nurses” (“Impertinent Daughters”, 54). By the time of World War II nursing was a more respectable, although still not an acceptable, profession for middle class women.
3. Gayle Greene's essay on *Landlocked* finally gives that novel the kind of attention it deserves; she sees its mythic underpinnings and its profound kinship to “The Waste Land”.
4. Other background male deaths include Benjamin Cohen in the Spanish Civil War, Elaine Talbot's sweetheart, the young pilots stationed in Salisbury, and the sweethearts of three older generation women, May Quest, Myra Maynard, Mrs. Talbot, in World War I.
5. Lessing insists on Martha's immersion in World War I elsewhere in *Landlocked* (see epigraph) and in other novels in the series, in *Martha Quest* especially. In the Newquist interview Lessing identifies totally with her fictional character on this issue: “but this baby who was still in the womb did not want to be born. First, there was the war (I was born in 1919) and the smell of war and suffering was everywhere and the most terrible cold... It was cold because of the war” (*SPV* 59).
6. This awareness pervades the Canopus quintet which is, however, still characteristically paradoxical, for it is both anti-war and imperialist.
7. See Sprague, Chapter 7, “Radical Politics: *A Ripple from the Storm*” for a fuller discussion of politics and war in that novel.

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