

WOMEN AND THE CITY OF LONDON IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE DIARIES OF JANE SOMERS* (1984)

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RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la perspectiva femenina de Londres en *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984) de Doris Lessing. La autora ofrece una visión feminista de la ciudad en su representación como un escenario. La protagonista, Janna, pasea por la ciudad como una *flâneuse* observando el espectáculo de la vida urbana. Su relación con la anciana Maudie Fowler le permite ver más allá de los límites de espacio y tiempo, y Janna interpreta Londres como un palimpsesto, un manuscrito que revela huellas de textos previos. Lessing combina la imagen de teatro y palimpsesto en su visión de la ciudad. Además, Lessing no separa la naturaleza del ambiente urbano, sino la incluye como una parte esencial de la ciudad. Por consiguiente, Lessing presenta un retrato de Londres que combina teatro, palimpsesto y naturaleza.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Doris Lessing, Londres como teatro, palimpsesto, *flâneuse*, ruptura de fronteras.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the feminine perspective of London in Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984). Lessing offers a feminist vision of the city representing London as a stage. Janna, the protagonist, strolls around the city, becoming a *flâneuse* as she gazes at the spectacle of urban life. Janna's relationship to the old woman Maudie Fowler enables her to see the different layers of time and space of London and read the city as a palimpsest, a manuscript that shows traces of earlier texts. Lessing blends the theatrical view of city with the palimpsest. Furthermore, nature is not separated from the urban environment, but included as an essential part of the city. The femininity in Lessing's view of London resides in the combination of theatre, palimpsest and nature.

KEYWORDS: Doris Lessing, London as a stage, palimpsest, *flâneuse*, cross-boundary.

In the *Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), Doris Lessing offers a female vision of London, which she portrays as a theatre in which its inhabitants are actors and spectators of urban life. Lessing represents the city as a place for human interaction where women are able to find a female space. The protagonist Jane Somers performs different roles while she gazes at the activities that are performed in the city—the great theatre—as she walks about its streets. I will argue that, while strolling around the city the protagonist becomes a *flâneuse*, although the possibility of a female version of the male urban stroller has been questioned. When Jane Somers strolls around the city,

she reads the cityscape as if were a text and pays attention to its fragmentary details. Hence, Lessing's theatrical view of London is especially feminine due to the fragmentary and multilayered representation as opposed to a traditional panoramic or linear illustration. In her interpretation of London as a stage she incorporates multifaceted and fragmentary aspects typical of the palimpsest, a document that shows traces of past texts. The author's representation of London as a stage includes both elements of space and time, and accounts from the past surface up through the storytelling of the elders. Lessing's vision of London can thereby be interpreted as a combination of the theatre and the palimpsest. Moreover, what also makes her vision of the city feminine is the integration of nature as an inseparable part of the city. Hence, Lessing blends theatre, palimpsest and nature into a specifically female vision of the city.

The Diaries of Jane Somers was published for the first time in 1984 and compiles the two novels *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983) and *If the Old Could* (1984), both published under the pseudonym of Jane Somers. Lessing gives two main reasons for writing these novels under an unknown name. Firstly, she «wanted to make a little experiment» and see what reviews the novels would receive when they did not benefit from the name of an acclaimed author¹. Secondly, she expressed a wish to encourage young writers by proving that certain attitudes and proceedings writers had to face when trying to get their work published, were mere routines and had nothing to do with their talent. *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* was first offered to two major publishers in London, Jonathan Cape and Granada. Lessing reveals that the first publisher rejected it at once whereas Granada answered that it was «too depressing to publish»². However, once it was published, readers loved it, although it did not receive many positive reviews by critics. In fact, Lessing remarks that once her pseudonym was revealed, «all the people who were not publishers and critics thought it was the most marvellous thing that had ever happened»³. The author moreover admits that a third, a little more malicious reason for using a pseudonym was to respond to the critique she had received for abandoning realism when writing the Canopus series. Nevertheless, as Lessing remarks in the preface to *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, these critics never recognised her return to realism when she hid her identity behind the name of Jane Somers⁴.

The novels tell us about the life of the middle-aged Londoner Jane Somers, or Janna as she is called, and depict her relationship to an old woman named Maudie Fowler. Doris Lessing gives a warm and human account of the bond established between these two women and describes how this relationship affects their lives. G. Greene argues that the mother-daughter relationship, so often tackled in Lessing's fiction, appears again in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* in the form of a surrogate rela-

¹ D. LESSING, «Doris Lessing Talks About Jane Somers». *Doris Lessing Newsletter*, vol. 1, 10 (1986), pp. 2-3.

² *Ibidem*, p. 3.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁴ D. LESSING, *The Diaries of Jane Somers*. London: Harper Collins, 2002 (1st ed. 1984).

relationship between Janna and Maudie⁵. Greene further states that «I think that one of the functions of the Jane Somers pseudonym was to allow Lessing to deal with matters she could not confront as Doris Lessing, still cathected matters related to the mother»⁶. The city of London is another recurrent element in Lessing's novels, and in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* the capital plays an important role, both as setting and as an active part in the lives of the characters. Lessing portrays city life and how the urban anonymity may be annulled by opening up to others, which testifies to the possibility of human interaction. The first volume centres on Janna and Maudie's growing friendship and how this relationship turns Janna into a more perceptible person. This enables her to establish kinships with other people, and subsequently in the second volume there is an emphasis on her relationship with her nieces Jill and Kate and her lover Richard.

In her book, *A Female Vision of the City: London in the Novels of Five British Women* (1989), C. Wick Sizemore points out that while contemporary British male writers such as Graham Greene and John Fowles turn to exotic and historical settings, female writers are taking over the tradition of writing about the city. She further argues that the city is represented as a space open to a female experience and as having a place for women⁷. According to Sizemore:

the characters in their novels do not observe the city from behind curtained windows [but] they literally walk the streets of the city at all hours of the day and night. These novelists portray the actual city of London... [as] an active component... that reveals the nature of the protagonists in their observation of the city⁸.

In *The Diaries of Jane Somers* the protagonist Janna (Jane Somers), gives her vision of London through her observations of the daily activities in the streets. Although Sizemore does not mention the *flâneur*, I do consider that Janna becomes a *flâneuse*, a female variant of the *flâneur*, as she wanders around London gazing at activities in the city.

The figure of the *flâneur* is traditionally male, and he appears as an urban stroller who walks the streets to observe the city scene beholding it as if watching a theatrical performance. Because of this, the *flâneur* is connected to a theatrical imagery of the city due to taking pleasure in gazing at the spectacle of urban everyday life. The image of the city as a theatre was well established in the nineteenth century thanks to the writers and journalists that published sketches from the metropolis⁹. These journalists observed the new urban environment and wrote

⁵ G. GREENE, *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 190-91.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 190.

⁷ C. WICK SIZEMORE, *A Female Vision of the City: London in the Novels of Five British Women*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989, pp. 3-4.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁹ For a detailed description of the journalistic representations of the urban life of nineteenth-century published as sketches in so called *feuilletons* see D. BRAND, *The Spectator of the*



down sketches applying the same tone they used in theatrical and literary reviews. One critic notes that they provided a panoramic vision of the city from the point of view of a stroller who observed daily life in the city as if gazing at scenes in a play¹⁰. These writers used the streets as source material that they obtained while strolling around as *flâneurs* observing people on the urban scene. The *flâneur* is connected to nineteenth-century Paris, especially to the poet Charles Baudelaire¹¹, where this figure appeared in the metropolis as a stroller who wandered around the city without any set purpose to take in impressions from the urban scene. As mentioned before, the *flâneur* passed through the city, often unperceived, to gaze at the city's activities and dwellers as if watching a play in the theatre. In this sense the spectator remains off stage from where he gazes at the performance on stage without actively participating in it. Thereby in a theatrical representation of the city, the distance between the audience and the show on stage is kept.

As mentioned above, the *flâneur* is a man, and in fact B. Mazlish notes that Baudelaire's *flâneur* is certainly *not* a woman¹². Actually, the *flâneur* is connected to the male gaze and the possession or mastery it tends to impose on the object, in this case the city and its inhabitants. R. Shields states that «the *flâneur* is a figure of excess: an incarnation of a new urban form of masculine passion manifest as connoisseurship and couched in scopophilia»¹³. Therefore, it is no wonder that the *flâneur* is seen as an embodiment of the male gaze, something that E. Wilson claims to be anchored in a postmodern and feminist reading¹⁴. Although the *flâneur* often appears in male shape in the nineteenth century, there did exist a female variant as well: the *flâneuse*. Wilson argues that independent women writers like Delphine Grey and George Sand had to adopt male identities, usually in form of writing their articles under pseudonym. George Sand, the most famous example, went a step further and used male disguise in order to access the city with liberty¹⁵. Whereas the nineteenth century *flâneuse* was similar to her male counterpart, the contemporary *flâneuse* is much more distinguished from the nineteenth century *flâneur*.

P. Hidalgo remarks that the Baudelairian *flâneur* is characterised by modernity, and subsequently gender-conscious criticism ascribes the urban experience of modern literature to men¹⁶. Even though the possibility of a *flâneuse* has been questioned, it is a figure that appears in literature —an example of this is Miriam

City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ The place and time that the French *flâneur* is tied to is the Paris of the nineteenth century. In addition, the figure of the metropolitan stroller is also tied to a person: the French poet Charles Baudelaire who has been conjured in the analysis of Walter BENJAMIN, «Introduction», in K. TESTER (ed.), *The Flâneur*, London & New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 1.

¹² B. MALISH, «The *Flâneur*: from Spectator to Representation», *ibidem*, p. 53.

¹³ R. SHIELDS, «Fancy Footwork: Walter Benjamin's Notes on *Flânerie*», *ibidem*, p. 64.4

¹⁴ E. WILSON, «The invisible *Flâneur*». *New Left Review*, vol. 191(1991), p. 98.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

¹⁶ P. HIDALGO, «Female *flânerie* in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*». *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, vol. 6 (1993), p. 93.

Henderson in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*. In the article «Female *Flânerie* in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*» Hidalgo examines how the protagonist Miriam Henderson renders a female vision of London arguing that «the text foregrounds the difference in men and women's language, attitudes, ways of thinking, and feelings»¹⁷. Miriam's walks about London is characterised by a combination of involvement and non-involvement, and Hidalgo argues that Miriam's freedom depends on «her resisting the emotional demands made on her by other women»¹⁸. Thus, Richardson foregrounds Lessing's treatment of the city, yet, as I will argue, Lessing's heroine both observes daily life from a distance and interacts with its inhabitants putting an emphasis on female bonding.

In the urban novels written by contemporary women writers that offer the vision of the city as a stage, the *flâneuse* becomes a crucial interpreter of the city. Novels like Lessing's *The Four-Gated City* (1969) or *The Diaries of Jane Somers* and more recently Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian novel, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998)¹⁹, envision London through the eyes of a *flâneuse* who moves around the city and observes it as if it were a great theatre. In the depiction of the city as a theatre, the *flâneur* or *flâneuse* appears as a spectator and interpreter of the urban spectacle. He or she strolls around the city and takes in the different impressions of the urban scene, reading it as if it were a text. R. Arias points out that «these female characters observe and watch the comings and goings of the people in London and, in doing so, they are able to *read* the city, described as a great theatre...»²⁰. The *flâneuse*, in contrast to the *flâneur*'s panoramic view of the metropolis, notices the many layers that are present underneath the first impression of the city, and is thereby read as a palimpsest. They take into account the multiple and fragmentary aspects of the city in a way which reflect woman's own fluid identity.

Janna becomes a spectator of the sketches that are enacted in the city as she walks the city of London observing scenes from the streets. Episodes from the lives of characters are represented as little sketches in which they perform roles. Nevertheless, the depiction of London as a theatre in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* turns the city into a scene to behold and a stage to act upon. In contrast to the nineteenth-century *flâneur* who remained in the distance from where he observed the crowd, contemporary women's urban literature often diminishes the distance between audience and spectacle, and allows the *flâneur* or *flâneuse* to enter the scene. This way, the *flâneur* or *flâneuse* becomes an active part in the performance partially or integrally, and the city becomes

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

¹⁹ The phenomena in contemporary fiction of recycling the Victorian period as theme and setting is today widely referred to as neo-Victorian fiction among scholars and literary critics. However, being a relatively new field of study, it is still a term that is debated around and also known under the name of pseudo-, post- or retro-Victorian. In A. KIRCKKOPF, «(Re)Workings of nineteenth-century fiction: Definitions, terminology, contexts». *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 1.1 (2008), p. 53.

²⁰ R. ARIAS, «'All the world's a stage': Theatricality, spectacle and the *flâneuse* in Doris Lessing's Vision of London». *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 14.1 (2005), p. 3. Original emphasis.

a space of human interaction. The city is an integrate part of Lessing's novels, and as C. Sprague claims that the city is central to her work: «[Lessing] is stubborn in her insistence on the city as the center of human interaction»²¹. In contrast to Miriam in *Pilgrimage*, Janna does not resist emotional demands by other women. She interprets different roles with different persons; with Maudie she performs the role of a caretaker or daughter while with Kate she interprets a more maternal role.

Some of Doris Lessing's novels, like for example *The Four Gated City*, are characterised as a giving a view of the city as a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a document that has been rewritten, and as a consequence, it is multilayered text that shows traces of previous work that resist time. Susan Watkins explains that it is «literally, a manuscript that has been erased and written over again, the palimpsest bears textual traces of its history as visible evidence of change»²². Although Lessing gives her view of the city as a theatre in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, the multilayered concept of the palimpsest is maintained. I have earlier pointed out that London serves as a stage set for daily-life sketches. As Janna passes through the city, both as a spectator and a participant, we are getting glimpses of different episodes in the lives of a wide variety of urban characters. This can be seen at the moments when the narrative describes how Janna takes pleasure in unremarkable episodes of urban routines «... I walk and walk around the city, and feed —which is how I feel it— on the people: the little scenes that stage themselves, the comedies, a spirit of surreal enjoyment, that is always there, coming out in what a man says in the greengrocer's, or two girls on a bus»²³. Here, urban life is depicted as theatrical sketches of diverse characters. The mixture of people and the different layers of generations and social classes blend together in the performances in the city. Lessing celebrates the city in her theatrical depiction of London by representing it as multilayered and fragmentary. D. Epstein Nord argues that what «literary representations of isolated urban encounters... share with panoramic views of the city [is] the element of theater or spectacle»²⁴. In *The Diaries of Jane Somers* we are offered an image of London as a great theatre set which offers us spectacle and amusement. However, Lessing combines the imagery of theatre and palimpsest in her view of London as a stage, because it is rather «palimpsestic» that panoramic. In Sizemore's words:

Janna's image of the city as a theatre is another kind of palimpsest, less spatial, but still multilayered. There are numerous layers of reality to the theater just as there are in the city, and each scene, each episode of city life, is a many-layered fragment to be read and enjoyed²⁵.

²¹ See C. WICK SIZEMORE, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²² S. WATKINS, «'Grande dame' or 'New Woman': Doris Lessing and the palimpsest». *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory*, vol. 3.17 (2006), p. 247.

²³ D. LESSING, *op. cit.* (2002), p. 305.

²⁴ D. EPSTEIN NORD, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 23.

²⁵ C. WICK SIZEMORE, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

Janna enjoys these fragmentary episodes performed by a diversity of urban citizens. She views this multidimensional aspect as something positive to take pleasure in and learn from. As well as a palimpsest shows many layers and traces of different texts, the city and its inhabitants are multilayered and fragmentary. The fragmentary episodes are woven together in one text which is transparent allowing us to see what is underneath. Sizemore and Arias recognise Chodorow's concept of woman as multilayered in the work of Doris Lessing. Sizemore notes that women build layers of identification²⁶, and Arias points out the multilayered aspect of women's psyche can be connected to the multilayered text²⁷, *i.e.* the palimpsest. Bearing in mind this multifaceted female identity as we approach the city as a palimpsest, we can recognise that woman's fluid ego boundaries make the reading of the city's many layers possible. Therefore, it could be argued that Lessing's vision of London as a palimpsest is especially feminine. Moreover, the underlying message in feminist novels is likened to the underneath texts in a palimpsest. Sizemore argues that women, especially, are suited as urban novelist due to their tradition of introducing messages underneath the actual text, and that the recognition of fragmentation and multiplicity is reflected in the perception of the city as a combination of the palimpsest and the theatre²⁸.

As D. Epstein Nord herself points out, a «panoramic view of London is not only highly picturesque but also artificial»²⁹. In «Women's Time» Julia Kristeva argues that female subjectivity is linked to cyclical and monumental time whereas history is linked to linear time³⁰. I want to connect this vision of linear time (associated with a male perspective) to the panoramic presentation of theatre and contrast it with a female vision of theatre as multilayered and palimpsestic. Janna recognises the multiplicity and presence of the past in the many layers of London's architecture. In the 1970s feminist theatre criticism rejected realism on the basis that its linear structure was only apt to reflect male experience. Feminist dramatists sought new forms to represent the female experience and tried to replace linear dramatic structures with more circular or fluid forms³¹. Thus, in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* Lessing gives a specifically female view of the city depicting the dramatic representation of London as more fluid thanks to fragmentary aspects of time and space belonging to the palimpsest. Her vision includes a wide variety of urban characters belonging to different social classes and generations. The observer accesses a moment in time, a fragment in the life of people and is able to build up a story on it:

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

²⁷ R. ARIAS, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁸ C. WICK SIZEMORE, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²⁹ D. EPSTEIN NORD, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³⁰ T. MOI (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 187.

³¹ P. SCHROEDER, *The Possibilities of Dramatic Realism*. Farleigh & London: Associated University Press, 1996, p. 21.



Every public space is like a theatre, but pubs most of all, because people coming in are so often regulars. Richard and I sit where we can, until we can get into our favourite place, which is a corner, so we can be out of the way and no one need notice us... How people do come and go, apparently without reason, but each caught tight into his or her little patters, their trip into the pub a fragment of the pattern which is invisible to us. How various we all are, never a face repeated, the amazing mix and match; the door swings in, a new face appears, you could never have foreseen its uniqueness³².

Janna has lost her city eyes in her relationship to Maudie and pays attention to people and details she used to be blind to. Now she sees beyond the surface and pays attention to the uniqueness in individuals and hence, notices the fragments that build up the city as a whole.

Similar to the palimpsest — a text that spins over time and space — Lessing's theatrical London incorporates this temporal dimension through voices belonging to different generations. Hence, moments of storytelling provide a space of human interaction that lap over generational gaps. Greene argues that *The Diaries of Jane Somers* contain stories of several women and that they are more complicated than they appear to be at the first impression:

We learn about the past histories of these women and about their present lives... Their stories are interwoven so that they comment on one another and comment on such topics as youth and age, living with others and living alone, responsibility, commitment, work; and they raise such questions as the value of families, motherhood, marriage, male-female relationships and female friendships and the value of a life³³.

The stories of these women are interwoven and show traces of their past just like the different layers of texts in a palimpsest. Therefore, city is not only represented as a place open to women's experience but also, according to Sizemore, full of spaces for female relationships³⁴. Janna takes on the role of Maudie's caretaker in which they hold a kind of mother-daughter relationship. When Janna visits Maudie entertains her by giving her glimpses in to the past: «And she...entertains me. I did not realize it was that. Not until one day when she said, 'You do so much for me, and all I can do for you is to tell you my little stories, because you like that, don't you? Yes I know you do.' And of course I do»³⁵.

For Maudie, her stories are a way to keep Janna coming back to her. Janna enjoys hearing anecdotes from Maudie's life, but at the same time Janna entertains Maudie with telling her about incidents in her life: «I tell her about what I have been doing, and I don't have to explain much. When I've been at a reception for some

³² D. LESSING, *op. cit.* (2002), p. 304.

³³ G. GREENE, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

³⁴ C. WICK SIZEMORE, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³⁵ D. LESSING, *op. cit.* (2002), p. 89.

VIP or cocktail party or something, I can make her see it all»³⁶. Whereas Maudie crosses boundaries of time telling her stories from the past making it accessible to Janna, Janna in her turn crosses boundaries of space telling Maudie stories from the outside and a world that is not available to her. Thereby the theatrical view takes on characteristics of the palimpsest instead of limiting itself to a panoramic view. The city becomes a place where you can dig up «the past and view the layers of personal and urban history»³⁷. By crossing boundaries of time and space, human interaction is made possible. In this sense, human relationships become cross-boundary because they transcend generation gaps, class difference and gender. An example of this is the friendship that grows between Maudie and Janna stretches over generations and class. Their relationship is characterised by interdependency, which is articulated in the kinship that ties these two women together. On the one hand, Maudie depends on Janna who takes care of her necessities, and on the other hand Maudie becomes necessary to Janna in her role as the mother that Janna never took care of. Therefore, their relationship becomes a kind of symbiosis of love and trust, which is marked by nurture. In her analysis of *The Four-Gated City*, Sizemore connects Martha Quest's ability to read the city as a fragmentary text and by accepting its fluidity she comes to terms with her own fluid ego boundaries. The same idea can be applied to Janna in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*. At first Janna defines who she is through her work and is concerned with maintaining her ego boundaries for fear of losing control. Yet, her friendship with Maudie makes her accept her fluid ego boundaries and she opens up for others that she gains a female vision of the city. Her relationship to Maudie enables her to see things that have been invisible to her before, and she realizes the small efforts made by women in the city to take care of others. I have argued that Janna acts as a *flâneuse* and Brand notices that originally *flânerie*, the activity of strolling, was connected to men's independence from social and familial responsibilities³⁸. This is not a characteristic that denotes Janna's experience. Conversely, Lessing describes the female participation in the city as one of nurturing and caring for others. Hence, the small chores these women carry out keep the city alive. Janna's multilayered personality is reflected in the many different roles that she plays: caretaker, nurturer and lover. The fluidity of femininity not only allows for a palimpsestic reading of the city, but also for the relationship between people belonging to different social layers, as class, gender, race or age. Janna and Maudie's friendship is established by nurturing bonds, and Maudie opens Janna for «women's time» in the city³⁹. Here, Sizemore hints at Julia Kristeva's essay «Women's Time» which distinguishes the feminist view of time as cyclical in contrast to patriarchal view of time as linear⁴⁰. Kristeva states that:

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ D. EPSTEIN NORD, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

³⁸ D. BRAND, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³⁹ C. WICK SIZEMORE, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁴⁰ First published in French as «*Le temps des femmes*» in 33/44: *Cahiers de recherche de sciences des textes et documents*, vol. 5 (Winter 1979), pp. 5-19.



[...] we are constantly faced by a double problematic: that of *identity* constituted by historical sedimentation, and that of their *loss of identity* which is produced by this connection of memories which escape from history only to encounter anthropology. In other words, we confront two temporal dimension: the time of linear history [...] and the time of another history, thus another time, *monumental time*⁴¹.

The philosopher stresses the role of sociocultural categories, such as age and sex, as they condition modes of reproduction and representations. Subsequently, Kristeva argues that temporality is a fundamental dimension to the forming of human beings. Here, she proposes a third temporal dimension —cyclical time— which she links to women: «As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations»⁴². Thus, Kristeva's cyclical time is relevant to female visions of the city as a palimpsest.

The palimpsestic feature of the city and femininity, which resides in its multilayered aspect, makes cross-boundary relations over time and space possible. The temporal dimension is overlapped by the different generations in the female bonding between Maudie and Janna, or Janna and Kate. These relationships unlock boundaries between separate spheres, which would be unavailable for them otherwise. This is proved by the way Maudie tells Janna stories from the past and Kate envisions the world of teenagers for Janna. What makes this cross-boundary or palimpsestic view of time feminine is that it interrupts the linear time connected to, according to Kristeva, history and a male dimension of time⁴³. The representation of the temporal dimension as multilayered and transcendent reflects the multilayered psyche of female identity. Hence, this fluidity of time and space in the reading of the city as a palimpsest makes the vision of the city female indeed. Moreover, in the theatrical representation of London, women form part of the urban spectacle both as spectators and actors, changing scene between the different districts and spaces of the city. Whereas Maudie envisions the past for Janna through her stories, Janna envisions the outside for Maudie through her accounts. The combination of theatre and palimpsest in the interpretation of London recognizes the fragmentary and multilayered aspects that lies beneath the city surface, and is moreover adequate for the representation of the female experience.

Lessing includes «numerous varieties of reality» through the stories of Janna and Maudie. Furthermore, Janna's teenage niece Kate stages her emotions and acts to get attention in a melodramatic way: «How can I go home?» she wailed, turning it on, or so it sounded, so that I was even, for a moment, encouraged: I find that when she is play-acting in a rehearsed scene, is genuinely sullen, I am pleased»⁴⁴. When these episodes take place between different generations, the play-acting emphasises

⁴¹ J. KRISTEVA, «Women's time». Trans. A. Jardine & H. Blake. *Signs*, vol. 7.1 (1981), p. 14.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 15-16.

⁴³ T. MOI (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁴⁴ D. LESSING, *op. cit.* (2002), p. 310.

the temporal aspects of a theatrical view shared with the palimpsest. Hence, the human interrelations characteristic in the novels by Lessing, find room in time and space in a combination of the city read as a palimpsest and a theatre: «I was asking her to share this day with me because of the spontaneous embrace when I got back from Amsterdam, which I felt marked an entrance into a new stage. Of affection? Of sisterhood!»⁴⁵. From a feminist viewpoint the linear or panoramic form of drama is broken. Temporal boundaries are blurred and the dimension of time becomes fluid. Female relationships that lap over generations find a place within this space and can be compared to the layers of text in a palimpsest. According to Sizemore, Lessing portrays the city as multilayered not only in spatial dimensions but also incorporates temporality. The critic suggests that this temporal dimension manifests itself in the shape of histories, lives and loves⁴⁶. In this sense, while reading the city as a palimpsest in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* the narrative reveals both spatial and temporal layers. In Arias's words, «the city is mixed, partial and layered, as districts overlapping with one another in space and in time»⁴⁷. Here, the temporal dimension manifests itself, as mentioned above, in the shape of histories (the ones told by Maudie), lives (the fragments of lives in the different scenes of the city —the great theatre) and loves (maternal love to Maudie and Kate, passionate love to Richard).

Moreover, the palimpsest consists of layers of different works and reveals traces of earlier texts that show through the manuscript. The mobility of the characters between observing and entering the show emphasizes how limits and boundaries are transparent like the text in a palimpsest. Janna does not limit herself to remain a passive observer, but also takes action in some episodes. Nord claims that in nineteenth-century urban literature the observer preserves his anonymity at all times and that the scene is not entered by the spectator⁴⁸. Yet, on the contrary, Lessing allows her characters to move freely across boundaries and take part in the performance. Their presence on the urban scenery of London becomes cross-boundary as they act both as spectators and performers. At the same time as the characters observe the spectacle, they are able to cross the proscenium arc to enter the play. When Janna moves around in the city she is not only the subject that observes, but also becomes the object of observation. In a scene at a fruit and vegetable stall, Janna is included in the stall-holder's show when she purchases groceries: «A stall-holder playing at being a stall-holder, with all the tricks: entertainment, people queuing for that as much as for a lettuce or a toffee apple. I have been the entertainment»⁴⁹. When Janna and Richard walk through London together, it does not only serve as a theatre where they can enjoy performance. It also serves as their private theatre where they can act out their desires and escape real life. The couple has a mutual agreement of not revealing any information about their private lives: «we did not discuss his problems or my problems, or the state of the world or of

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 387.

⁴⁶ C. WICK SIZEMORE, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁴⁷ R. ARIAS, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴⁸ D. EPSTEIN NORD, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁹ D. LESSING, *op. cit.* (2002), p. 390.

Britain. Taboo!»⁵⁰. At the same time that they stroll around the city practising *flânerie* or being spectators, they play-act for each other and keep their relationship in terms of a theatrical interpretation under mutual understanding.

When Janna and Richard meet they are aware of the dramatics that underlies their meetings, and soon realize how hard it is to keep reality out. In their meetings they learn facts about each other's lives little by little and both recognize it: «Quite soon we'll know everything about each other, I said, Reality keeps breaking in»⁵¹. Although they may remain anonymous as spectators, they lose their anonymity as actors. At the same time as they enter the scene they become visible to others. When they step onto the stage they move from the position of holding the gaze to being observed themselves since they have entered the spotlight. They learn to enjoy the London stage both as spectators and actors as they move around the city. This is revealed in the following passage, which takes place at a café: «the typical haunt of the continental *flâneur*» according to Hidalgo⁵². Although Janna and Richard remain invisible as they stay in the observer's position they are still active participators in making up stories as they interpret what is seen on the stage:

We watched the people coming and going at the tables near us, and might exchange a smile or a look that summed up what we thought about them. We watched the little dramas and eavesdropped. Or we talked —what do we talk about, when so much cannot be said, or even approached? We make up little stories about what we see; we tell each other about people we know. What this is, is a shared solitude⁵³.

The fragmentary episodes perceived in the city amuse them and they imagine stories behind the scenes. Since Janna and Richard do not share their private lives with each other and keep their anonymity they both perform a role when they meet. The moments they spend together in the city become a way to escape solitude and to enjoy life. Not only do they make up stories about what they see in the streets but also do so about the people they know. At the same time as they watch the performance and play roles for each other they are creating a space for human interaction. These fragmentary scenes and the depiction of borders as transparent contain female aspects that are celebrated as positive by the author.

Another feature that makes Lessing's vision of London feminine is her refusal to contrast the city with nature. Instead of separating them in a city/nature dichotomy, the author incorporates natural elements as belonging to the city⁵⁴. Lessing integrates nature in her theatrical view by portraying the changes of the day through a description of the colours of the sky with light qualities as if it were a theatre. For instance, she includes nature as part of the city by describing dusk through the reflection of

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 422.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 356.

⁵² P. HIDALGO, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁵³ D. LESSING, *op. cit.* (2002), p. 295.

⁵⁴ C. WICK SIZEMORE, *op. cit.* (1989), p. 25.

the lights of the London scene in the sky: «I look up out of my large window at the theatrical London sky, purple and mauve, hazy with reflected light, a sky that is never dark because of London lying there beneath it, throwing up its image to dazzle off cloud or dark»⁵⁵. The author's view of London combines nature, city and theatre. Nature makes its presence on the London stage as topic and as part of the scenery. As a small-talk topic, the weather represents a natural element in the dialogues in scenes from daily urban life: «No wonder we talk about the weather, think about it, are obsessed with it. What a theatre it is, what a pageant, what a free show, in lovely England where one hour is so seldom the same as the one before»⁵⁶. Sizemore argues that Lessing sees no contrast between nature and the city, and that it forms part of the palimpsestic city⁵⁷. Returning to the nineteenth-century image of the city, writers paid attention to the growth of the city at the cost of nature and saw the new city life as unnatural. As mentioned before, contemporary male writers retire from the city searching more exotic and natural settings. Women writers, however, see nature as part of the city and do not see the city as an unnatural place. In *The Diaries of Jane Somers* nature is present in the different parks, plants and flowers, whereby the city is not described as an unnatural and hostile environment. Since London is represented as a stage, gardens and vegetation form part of the décor «She hasn't been mentioned; nor Kathleen, who has been in Hull with her grandmother; nor Kate; nor John, nor Matthew. All that has been far away, on the other side of the hill, beyond a screen of leaves and flowering shrubs and roses»⁵⁸. Nature is present as a component of the urban image inseparable from the city or its culture. Throughout the novel it makes its presence by breaking in on the scenery by little detail like the scent from a rosebush or the description of daylight. In short, Lessing's offers a female vision of London by making it possible for nature and the city to blend together in the theatrical space, something that is emphasised by making them inseparable.

To conclude, Lessing gives a new female vision of London as a stage breaking with the traditional male apprehension of theatre as panoramic and linear. This paper has examined Lessing's theatrical view of the city as a hybrid of theatre and the palimpsest since her vision shows aspects of both. The London stage, upon which its citizens perform scenes from their lives, is represented in the terms of a palimpsest with its fragments, various layers and traceability of the past. In the reading of the city as a palimpsest, both temporal and spatial dimensions are taken into account. The notion of «women's time» as non-linear makes a cross-boundary approach to the city scene available. In other words, the fluidity of femininity makes the interpretation of the city as palimpsest possible. The characters read the many layers of the city and pay attention to fragmentary details. The relationship to Maudie has taught Janna to be more open to her surroundings, and after losing her city eyes,

⁵⁵ D. LESSING, *op. cit.* (2002), p. 312.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 337.

⁵⁷ C. WICK SIZEMORE, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁵⁸ D. LESSING, *op. cit.* (2002), p. 424.



Janna is able to perceive tall layers and dimensions of the city. As Janna moves around the city as a *flâneuse* or as an actor she passes both spatial and temporal boundaries in her relations to people. The «palimpsestic» qualities of the London scene allow her to develop her ability to see beyond the surface and interpret its many layers, which results in a progress in her relationship to her fellow beings. Therefore, the palimpsestic London stage opens its curtains for interplay between women in the city, and becomes the appropriate scene for female bonding across generation and class.

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