

Relationship Between Women and Knowledge  
in Lessing's The Summer Before the Dark,  
Martha Quest and A Proper Marriage

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**The Relationship Between Women and  
Knowledge in Doris Lessing's  
*The Summer Before the Dark, Martha Quest and  
A Proper Marriage***

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## Introduction

Doris Lessing was born Doris May Tayler in Persia (now Iran) on October 22, 1919. Both of her parents were British. Her father who had been crippled in the World War I was a bank clerk and her mother, a nurse. In 1925, lured by the promise of getting rich through maize farming, the family moved to the British colony in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Her mother wanted a high standard of living but her father did not. The thousand acres of bushes her parents had bought failed to yield them their promised wealth. Lessing describes her childhood as a mixture of some pleasure and much pain. Her mother, obsessed with raising a proper daughter, enforced a rigid system of rules and hygiene at home. Lessing was sent to a convent school, where the nuns terrified her with the stories of hell and damnation. Later on, she was sent to an all girls school in the capital of Salisbury, from which she soon dropped out. She was thirteen, and it was the end of her formal education. Lessing left home when she was fifteen and took a job as a nursemaid. Her employer gave her books on politics and sociology to read. Lessing's fiction is deeply autobiographical, much of it emerging from her experiences in Africa. Her *Children of Violence* (1951-1959) series is about the growth of consciousness of her heroine, Martha Quest. So is *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973). This novel shows the growth and consciousness of the protagonist Kate who is in her forties.

This essay explores the consciousness of the female protagonists in three of Doris Lessing's novels: *The Summer Before the Dark*, *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*. The two novels *Martha Quest* and *A proper Marriage* are from the *Children of Violence* series, *Martha Quest* being the first and *A proper Marriage* being the second. This essay has three chapters. Each chapter focuses on the tensions between the main character and society. These characters at first act according to the roles assigned to them by society: as a wife, as a daughter and as a mother. Subsequently, they reject those traditional roles in order to create their own identity. My intention in this essay is to show how these female characters became successful in their journey of self-discovery against all odds. As these women are extremely

studious and talented, knowledge helps them in their journey of finding their real identity.

Chapter one deals with *The Summer Before the Dark*. This chapter analyses Kate's journey as a wife in order to reveal the development of her consciousness. Every journey she undertakes is shown as a stepping stone to find her real self.

Chapter two deals about the first novel of Children of Violence series: *Martha Quest*. This chapter examines Martha's journey as a daughter in order to find the essence and purpose of her life.

Finally chapter three, the second novel of *Children of Violence* series *A Proper Marriage* shows Martha journey as a mother to find herself and her aim in her life.

## **1. Kate and her journey to knowledge in Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark***

Kate is a woman of forty-five. She lives with her husband and four grown up children in the south of London. Her husband's name is Michael. They have been married for twenty five years. She is a housewife. The novel begins with: "A woman stood on her back step, arms folded waiting" (7). Here Lessing has used "a woman" instead of Kate in order to emphasize the later experiences of life being married, a mother and an ageing woman. The novel revolves around how Kate attempts to find her identity through language, memory and dreams. The family has enjoyed her service for the last twenty-five summers. However her life for this summer is decided for her by Michael. She will work as a translator for global food: "More, she was good at languages. Her knowledge of French and Italian was good; her Portuguese was perfect, for on one side she was Portuguese" (18). As St. Anders writes the beginning of her self begins with: "as with all Lessing's protagonists, new knowledge begins with an examination of language."<sup>1</sup> In *The Summer Before the Dark*, Lessing examines how language moulds Kate's identity. Kate's task is to sit in a "cubicle like" room and listen to speeches made in English, French and Italian and to translate them as she listened into Portuguese, which she would speak aloud into a transmitter connected to the ears of the Portuguese speaker. She becomes a kind of machine herself: into her ears flowed one language, and from her mouth flowed another. Due to her excellent service, she is offered another job as executive for Global food, with a lucrative salary, which she is flattered to accept. This job involves her flying to Istanbul. There she works as "a group mother" for lots of people from many countries who were attending the conference. She thinks she is away from home and its demands

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie St. Anders, *Forbidden Fruit: On the relationship between Women and Knowledge in Doris Lessing, Selma Lagerlöf, Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood* (New York: The Winston Publishing Company, 1986)113

but she is performing the same task as she is at home- taking care of others. In the quest to attain self-knowledge, Kate goes to Spain. During her stay in Spain memories of her childhood and husband haunts her. She feels that she is deserted by her children and family due to her appearance. She feels like she is on a verge of something. Kate recalls an event when her younger son told Eileen (Kate's only daughter) that Kate is in a state of menopause. Though it is not true, Kate begins to question her identity as a mother and as a wife. Kate's memory undergoes an intense examination where she reviews her identity as a mother for more than twenty years. She is in transition because she is facing a mid-life crisis where a woman no longer can bear or rear children. By analyzing her past and her present she is trying to know her inner-self. As Margaret Moan Rowe writes: "The tension throughout the novel is between Kate's exploration of inner-space and the literal journey she makes from England, to Turkey with Global Food, to Spain with a younger lover, back to London where she shares a flat with a younger women, and then to home."<sup>2</sup>

In the novel, the first phase of her journey ends in Istanbul. The second phase starts by her going to Spain with a young man called Jeffrey. He was thirty-two years old.

They could not be mother and son-no, impossible. Brother and sister? No, one could believe that a single womb has produced two such dissimilar human types. They were an incongruous marriage? No, their being together lacked the congruence of mood and movement by which one recognizes the married- and then, there were the documents, at the desk. There was nothing else, they must be lovers. (77)

Jeffrey gets ill in Spain. Kate is more like a mother to him, than a lover: "He was wet with sweat, and shivering. But he was determined to continue north. She took him by both shoulders and said: 'You are sick. Do you hear me? You are ill. You have got to let me put you into bed and get you a doctor'" (109). She is amused to find that Jeffery is looking for a mother-woman in her who would be strict, listen and understand him. With

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Moan Rowe, *Women Writers: Doris Lessing* ( London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994)68

Jeffery she simply has repeated the role of motherhood which she has successfully completed two decades ago.

During her journey, she has a recurring seal dream. It has haunted her the whole summer. And the dream unfolds progressively. The performances in the daylight feed her dream. In the daytime she was busy; most of the time helping others and at times recollecting the past. Due to this, she had a problem with sleeping. She is awake most of the time. It seems as if she has to be busy in order to dream at night; her only escape route was the seal dream. She starts to dream when she starts to work and then it continues until she sees herself as an individual rather mother and wife. Her dream begins in the dark cold north and ends there: “because it had appeared twice, it was announcing its importance to her” (50-51). The dream is like a journey to knowledge for Kate. Here, darkness and cold can be seen as a metaphor for aging and exile. In the seal dream, the landscape was rocky, slippery, and dark which can be seen as her fear of ageing and being alone. “She fell asleep and was at once on a rocky hillside. Yes, there was her poor seal, slowly, painfully, moving itself towards the distance, the invisible ocean. She gathered the slippery creature up in her arms-oh she ought not to have to left it there” (102).

Despite the difficulties, this dream helps her to fight with emotions that make her weak inside. In the journey towards survival, which she completes at the same time she completes the journey, she puts the seal back to the sea northwards to its safe zone. This journey is a parallel to her actual physical journey. Kate leaves home and England; she travels to turkey as an executive for Global Food. After finishing, Kate in turn accompanies Jeffery to Spain, rather than coming back to England. There she helps Jeffery with his illness. When she returns back, she becomes ill herself. In the Bloomsbury hotel she recovers from the illness and finishes her dream of the seal in the “cave-like” room in Maureen’s flat. Thus in some way Kate and the seal’s journey is similar. It is the seal that helped her to find her inner self and identity which she had left somewhere else. By the end, the seal returns to the sea and Kate her home: “Her journey was over. She sees that the sun is in front of her, not behind, not far behind, under the

curve of the earth, which is where it had been for so long. She looks at it, a large, light, brilliant, buoyant, tumultuous sun that seemed to sing” (235). The returning of the seal to the water represents Kate’s rebirth and her returning to her husband and children.

After returning from Spain, Kate became ill for few days. During that healing period she goes to the theatre to see Natalia Petronova’s “A Month in the Country”. While there she understands the true identity of human nature:

What those women had in common with Natalia Petrovna was that she was supposed to be twenty-nine, or so Turgenev said, but she was behaving and thinking like- was being acted by- a woman of fifty. A woman who thought of herself as getting old, grabbing at youth. Obviously the nineteenth century, like the lives of poor people, aged women fast. (152)

Finally, Kate realizes how the play has a deep impact upon the human life. Though Petrovna was barely twenty nine, she sounded and seemed like a women of fifty. At that particular point in her life Kate understood about her genuine identity:

Those actors were absolutely right. They didn’t allow themselves to be shut inside one set of features. One arrangement of hair, one manner of walking or talking, no, they changed about, were never the same. But she Kate Brown, Michael’s wife had allowed herself to be roundly slim red-head with sympathetic brown eyes for thirty years. (158)

Throughout the years Kate was trying to impress others and her own family by dressing in a certain way. In a sense, Kate was enlightened by seeing the play. And for the first time she chose to live outside the “cocoon” of social safety.

In order to save her life, Kate moves to the dark. As Bonnie St. Anders writes:

To save her life, she must move through the dark which represents on the one hand the known: her emotional conflict as a wife and as a mother. On the other hand, the dark suggests her long isolation from not only herself but her husband since darkness often symbolizes, in Lessing's novels, a communication barrier between individuals.<sup>3</sup>

In the final chapters of *The Summer Before the Dark* Kate resolves all her tensions and issues, which have been eating her for the past twenty five years. By moving alone to that dark room, she shows her readiness to conquer the fear of loneliness. By taking this step she has the knowledge that she can be herself without being with her family. Through her companionship with another daughter like girl called Maureen, she begins to remember her happy days with Michael and her children. Kate cannot forget those moments when they used to laugh and stay up the whole night enjoying each other. And Maureen pleads with her to tell stories about their happy times. In other words, by remembering all those glad moments she is setting aside those painful ones. She is in a desperate need to start a new chapter in her life by recollecting the happy moments she shared with her family and children. So due to those happy remembrances, she is able to complete the dream which she was seeing for the whole summer. Furthermore, during that period Kate learned to say "no" to her family: "Terribly sorry, very busy, will let you know before I arrive" (215). This can be seen as an example of her growth and her determination to complete the dream for finding her lost self. In order to change her identity she changes her hair and clothes. Shopkeepers, who were ready to greet her anytime, do not recognize her. Furthermore, Mary Finchley passes by her without saying anything. Nobody noticed her:

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<sup>3</sup> Bonnie St. Anders, *Forbidden Fruit: On the relationship between Women and Knowledge in Doris Lessing, Selma Lagerlöf, Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood* (New York: The Winston Publishing Company, 1986)127

But while her body heaved and manufactured tears, she was thinking, quite coolly, that coming here, coming to the hired room where no one knew her, was the first time in her life that she had been alone and outside a cocoon of comfort and protection, the support of other people's recognition of what she had chosen to present. But no one expected anything, knew anything about her supports, her cocoon. (168)

However, at times Kate was haunted by false memory. Those memories were trying to distract her from her knowledge. In order to get rid of them, she takes help of the seal dream. Equally whenever she has a false memory, it is about the comparison between Kate and Mary. Mary Finchley, in the novel acts as an alter-ego to Kate Brown. Though she is not a good friend to Kate, Mary revolves around her journey time and again. This particular event helped Kate believe her memory. The memory is trying to distract her but she easily realized that it is a "false" one: "It was not a memory that she could be proud of, to say at least" (146).

Kate Brown in the novel *The Summer Before the Dark* tries to analyze her self through exile. During her exile, she suffers a deep spiritual crisis which affects her physical appearance. The color of her hair fades and she loses quite a lot of weight. Her dress sense is also changed. She has no makeup on her face. While looking in the mirror, she gets the knowledge of how she looks at the age of forty-five. In this way she confronts her fear of ageing. By confronting the fear of ageing, she has the knowledge that physical appearance doesn't reveal anything about our true selves. By refusing to take care of her hair, she finally takes control of her appearance: "She had lost more weight. Her hair struck out around a face all bones, stiff and frizzy, streaked with orange, grey-rooted. She could not get her brush through it" (144). Thus, Kate goes through many ups and downs to find her identity as a woman besides being a mother and wife. Like the seal returns to the sea, she returns to her family. She learns that besides being attached to someone else, first and foremost she is an individual. Kate finds out that it is not unusual to be alone, have grey hair, be old, and have wrinkles. She also realizes that it is not the

outer appearance that defines the women; rather it is the inner experiences that justify her.

## 2. Martha and her journey to knowledge in Lessing's *Martha Quest*

We are introduced to Martha as a girl of fifteen, sitting “on the steps in full sunshine, clumsily twisting herself to keep the glare from her book with her own shadow” (9). She is living in the farm with her mother and father. They have a Dutch neighbor with whom her parents spend most of their daytime. The novel examines Martha's growth as an adolescent into a young woman with a dream and a vision about her career. In order to get that vision she reads lots of book: “She read as if this were a process discovered by herself; as if there had never been a guide to it. She reads like a bird collecting twigs for a nest. She picked up each new book, using the author's name as a sanction, as if the book were something separate and self-contained, a world in itself”(271-72). Furthermore, the Cohen brothers help her by providing books on economics, sociology, and psychology. As Jean Pickering writes-“ As an adolescent Martha developed a “detached observer” mostly by reading books on economics, sociology, and psychology provided by the Cohen brothers.”<sup>4</sup>

Martha always wanted a free life. She has problems at home with her mother. Whenever her mother said something, it had a negative effect on her. Martha always thought of herself as a grown-up but her mother saw her as a sweet little girl. She wanted to dress in her own way but her mother wanted it another: “My dear, nice girls don't wear clothes like this until –” (30). Martha replies her instantly: “I am not a nice girl,” broke in Martha and suddenly burst into laughter” (30). Her mother also had great expectations for her. She knows that Martha is intelligent and will make a career. She often boasts about Martha to Mrs. Van Rensberg: “... My daughter will be somebody, where as yours will only be married” (12). As Claire Sprague writes: “The two mothers, Mrs. Quest and Mrs. Van Rensberg, who open the *Martha Quest* novel are, for example, united against their children but divided against each other by nationality and religion and further divided

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<sup>4</sup>Pickering, Jean. “*Martha Quest and “The Anguish of Feminine Fragmentation”*. In *Critical Essays on Doris Lessing*, edited by Claire Sprague and Virginia Tiger.( Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall&Co, 1986)96

when their daughters are compared (May Quest is certain her Martha is better than Marnie Van Rensberg)”<sup>5</sup>. Everybody has faith in Martha that she will become and do something worthy. Martha however is still confused about it. She thinks about taking a job in town and living on her own. This desire to get freedom tormented her day and night. She only needed a chance to explore her potential and her knowledge. Luckily, she gets a job as a secretary and another phase of her life starts. As Margaret Moan says: “..., Lessing presents a critique of marriage and family as the enemy of free women”.<sup>6</sup>

Martha is living in the town alone by herself. In the due course of time, she happens to meet Donovan. If the Cohen brothers were the ones to show her path to wisdom Donovan shows her the way to social life, i.e. clubs, parties, drinks, smoking. In order to fit herself to the recent trend Martha begins slimming down: “She had slimmed herself during the past two years so that the bones of her pelvis were prominent, and this gave her great pleasure; and she went to bed vowing she must not put on weight” (134). This slimming behavior of Martha started during her stay in the farm with her father and mother. She just wanted to change herself in order to look different. Martha wants to prove to her mother that she is a grown up girl and can look good in grown up clothes. As Sarah Sceats writes: “Notwithstanding Martha’s reading, rebellious tendencies and views of herself as different, she accepts the socially approved female model at this early stage in her life without question...”<sup>7</sup>

Even though Martha gets a job and moves to the town, she is not sure what she wanted really. Likewise, her life moves on. After breaking up with Donovan, she has a relationship with Adolf. It is a failure as well. One thing Martha is always sure about was she wants her man to be intelligent and superior to others. She didn’t find those qualities in both of these boys- Donovan treats her as an object to try new trends whereas with Adolf also, nothing could become right. Adolf was a Jew and Martha’s friends didn’t

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<sup>5</sup> Sprague Claire. *Rereading Doris Lessing: Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition*. (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987)61

<sup>6</sup> Rowe, Margaret Moan. *Women Writers: Doris Lessing*. (London: Macmillan, 1994)30

<sup>7</sup> Sceats, Sarah. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000)75

want her to be seen with him. Her friends were constantly preventing her from meeting Adolf so she also thinks it is useless to be with a guy whom nobody likes. She repents the moments she spent with Adolf: “She told him that she loved him; she found herself saying all sorts of things that it embarrassed her afterwards to remember at all” (252-53). This breakup with Adolf had a deep impact on her. Then afterwards she knows about her capacities and capabilities. She also realizes that she was wasting her time for nothing throughout the years. She finds the aim of her life. She works hard in order to excel in typing. Martha becomes successful in typing. She thinks that with little concentration she can achieve that success; she would have been very successful if she had paid more attention. It was during those days that she read voraciously day and night in order to balance her feeling. As Elizabeth Maslen says:

...Martha, the voracious reader constantly debates the strengths and limitations of the books she reads to deal with what she is experiencing as a girl-woman. ...She is surprised at its silence on the pains of growing up and, since she does not yet possess the vocabulary to accuse for its silences, concludes that if novels accurately reflect, as we hope and trust they do, the life of their era, then one is forced to conclude that being young was much easier then it is now.<sup>8</sup>

Lessing’s protagonists leave home in order to enlighten themselves. It is the same with Martha. She knows the aim of her life. After breaking up with Adolf, Martha goes through lots of thoughts and feeling about what to do with life. The thought of “what next” occupied her. At the point in her life she thinks that she can shape her destiny. As she reads lots of books on varied subjects, she “dreamed of herself as a journalist, as a window dresser, applied for a job as chauffer to a rich old lady, and was thankful when she was turned down, on the ground of her youth. She decided she would become an inspired shorthand writer...” (286-287). Martha had never seen such a dream of hope throughout the years. The hope is that she will do something worthwhile in her life in order to make her days worthy on earth. She is delighted to find the aim or reason for her

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<sup>8</sup> Maslen, Elizabeth. *Doris Lessing*. (United Kingdom: Northcote House, 1994)10

life. We can say that the realization to do something in life is a breakthrough to her. She gets everything but she is still lacking the presence of men in her life. She finds out about Douglas. She thinks he is different and intelligent from other men. He has plans too “to live in the south of France and become a wine farmer” (295). She is very happy to find him: “She slept that night deeply and dreamlessly, for the first time in weeks; she did not start up, half a dozen times, with the feeling that there was something she ought to be doing...” (296). Douglas and Martha decide to marry. She, along with Douglas, goes to her father’s farm to marry. She wants to marry in a simple way. Still, she is no sure if she is marrying Douglas for herself or to fulfill her mother’s expectation: “She did not want to marry Douglas; she did not want to marry at all” (304). Something inside her mind was going on, as Elizabeth Maslen writes: “...Martha’s adolescence and marriage are a continual battle against her mother’s expectation of her crude invasion of her private life”.<sup>9</sup>

During her stay outside her parent’s home, Martha comes in contact with many men. Mr. Cohen is too kind and generous to her. He pays her more despite her insufficient qualifications. She also meets Mr. Spur, an old journalist of Zambesi News in order to get a better job. In turn she is embarrassed for she had no qualifications. She also meets the Cohen boys, who were the source of inspiration to her. Martha also mixes with party loving boys like Donovan, Adolf and her to be husband Douglas. As Elizabeth Masleen writes:

... Martha is more aggressively manipulated by men she meets: the wolves of the sports club with their endlessly sterile sexual teasing; Donovan with his dressing and shaping of her so as to make her literally conform to his ideas of what her image should be; Adolf, himself trapped by prejudice and paranoia, with his lessons on how to use and abuse; and Douglas, at first the means for an easy capitulation to the discourse of convention...<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Maseln 10.

<sup>10</sup> Maslen 10.

In the novel, Martha knows about herself and her aims in life after she leaves home and lives on her own. When she is living on her own, she has different kinds of emotions and feelings inside her. Later, she feels that, this turmoil made her stronger in the pursuit of a career. As Clinchy Belenky writes in her text that it is important for women:

...to reject further obligations to family members, and to move out and away on their own. They seemed to be saying to us that if firsthand experience was the route to knowing, then they were going to amass experiences. Although subject to extraordinary push and pulls- anxiety, anger, insecurity, guilt, depression, exhilaration-most of the women were making these changes with stubborn determination. Some realized they faced loneliness ahead, but they did not care.<sup>11</sup>

The final chapters of the novel *Martha Quest* Martha have a clear vision about her future. Despite her doubts, she is going to marry Douglas. She has become a more conscious and sensitive person. After being embarrassed by Mr. Spur of Zambesia News for not having sufficient qualifications, she goes to him, being more than qualified. She was offered a job as a columnist for a women's page. She was angry with him for not publishing a vacancy. Martha thinks that people have the right to have information about vacancies. All this fierceness came from reading. One thing with Martha is that she reads books reflecting reality. Of course, she has now her own opinion, if anybody argued with her: "...it was not the republicans who were the rebels, but Franco. She was well armed with facts from the *New Statesman*" (274).

However, Martha is a firm believer in experiences. Reading a book is an experience for her. She thinks that the knowledge of life is gained through experiences. She leaves home, takes a job, has many relationships, and now is going to get married. This all is an experience to her.

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<sup>11</sup> Belenky, Clinchy, et al. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind.* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) 76

What has this got to do with me? Mostly, she rejected; what she accepted she took instinctively, for it rang true with some tuning fork or guide within her; and the measure was the experience (she thought of it as one, though it was the fusion of many, varying in intensity) which was the gift of her solitary childhood on the veld: that knowledge of something painful and ecstatic, something central and fixed, but flowing. (272)

Furthermore, reading is a norm or the thing of seriousness to Martha where as having a relationship and getting married is normal. In a way we can argue that she didn't take relationships as seriously as her studies. It seems that reading is more important to her than marriage and relationships. It is quite the opposite with others. For her friend Marnie, marriage is a norm. As Mary Russo says: "It is identified with the norm as a prescription of correct, conventional, or moralizing behavior or identity and with the normal as it is commonly misapprehended as the familiar".<sup>12</sup>

The message Lessing conveys through the novel is that it is not the relationship or marriage that determines the fate of the women; rather it is knowledge. For sure we know that Martha will be successful with her career but still we are in doubt about her marriage.

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<sup>12</sup> Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. Preface(London, Routledge,1994)

### **3. Martha and her journey to knowledge in Lessing's *A Proper Marriage***

Martha begins her new married life. She has now become Mrs. Knowles. She is just nineteen when the novel begins. Though she gets married she is really afraid of becoming pregnant. Both Martha and Douglas didn't want children at that point. They were thinking about the war which was rumored to begin at any moment. Martha goes to Dr. Stern to make sure that she is not pregnant but the doctor in turn tells Martha that she is four months pregnant. This news shocks Martha into silence. She asks the doctor if he can help her with an abortion and the doctor says he can't. Martha was already feeling the pang of sickness inside her: "The child five inches long with eyes, nose, mouth, hands and feet, seemed very active. Martha sat feeling the imprisoned thing moving in her flesh, and was made more miserable by the knowledge that it had been moving for at least a week without her noticing it than by anything else"(420). Martha changes her mind. She feels happy that she is pregnant. Her husband Douglas also became happy hearing the news: "'We're having a kid' said Douglas proudly" (423). Everybody is happy except Martha's father. He says: "'So if one damned foolish girl wants to make a mess of her life...'" (429). He worries about Martha and her age. He thinks she has not yet come of age to deal with responsibilities. When she married Douglas, he was the one who was most unhappy. He thinks that she is in a hurry with everything. On the other hand, Martha is making things clear to Douglas about the baby's future:

First, even to suggest that the child might be one sex rather than another might have deplorable results- to be born as it chose was its first inalienable right. Secondly, they, the parents must never try to form its mind in any way whatsoever. Thirdly, it must be sent to a progressive school, where it might survive the process of education unlimited- for Martha felt, like so many others, that progressive schools were in some way outside society, vacuums of progress, as it were. If this last necessity involved their sending the child at an early age to a country where there was a progressive school, then so much the better; for a child

without any parents at all clearly had a greater chance of survival as a whole personality. (430)

As a matter of fact Martha wants to protect her child from Martha herself. She wants it be different from her: “She Martha, the free spirit, would protect the creature from her, Martha, the maternal force, the maternal Martha, that enemy, would not be allowed to enter the picture” (430). Martha knows that if she had not been nagged by her mother during her adolescence, her life would have been different. She feels the constant pressure of her mother all the time. She doesn’t want her history to be repeated with her child. Her friend Alice is also pregnant at the same time Martha is pregnant. Martha is supposed to give birth towards the end of the rainy season. Martha is feeling extremely restless during the days. She is afraid if something will go wrong while giving birth. In order to overcome their fear Martha and Alice go out in the rain. As Claire Sprague writes:

In *A Proper Marriage*, the middle-class and very pregnant Martha and Alice perform an almost orgiastic rite. They stripe naked and plunge into a pothole. Martha stands “to her knees in heavy mud, the red, thick water closed below her shoulders” (457). When the symbolic snake intrudes, it is quite unthreatening: “It slid down over the red pulpy mud, and, clinging with its tail to a clutch of grass, it allowed itself to lie on the surface, swaying its vivid head just above the water” (458). This celebration of fecundity and union, so obviously prelapsarian, contains an ebullience and abandonment rarely found in Lessing.<sup>13</sup>

In the course of time Martha gives birth to a baby girl. Her name is Caroline. Being a progressive woman, independence is important to Martha. She wants to make her daughter independent as well. So, Martha is making Caroline independent by ignoring and not breast-feeding. Instead Caroline is fed through the bottle. Mrs. Quest used to visit Martha and looking at Martha she used to say: “I suppose you’ve been starving her as I

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<sup>13</sup> Sprague, Claire. *Rereading Doris Lessing: Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition*. (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987) 162

starved you” (484). As a modern women Martha likes herself to be in shape but not for the sake of her husband. By eating less she is taking control over her body. As she is not breast-feeding Caroline anymore, she starves herself to get her figure back. As Sarah Sceats writes:” Denying her body by refusing her hunger becomes an accomplishment in itself; she is acquiring a disciplined body. By the time she grows to be politically active, self-deprivation is a habit and she slips easily into a pattern of hungry irritability because she is simply too busy to eat”.<sup>14</sup>

Douglas goes to the war. Martha is alone at home with Caroline. Martha in *A Proper Marriage* has plenty of leisure time with her and she doesn’t know how to use it. Her morning started from ten. The day is hers own. She is free to do what she liked. Neither housework nor motherhood appeals to her. Motherhood didn’t pacify her. She is restless all the time. She knows that she needs to do something worthy but didn’t know what it is. Motherhood has deepened her estrangement. As Margaret Moan Rowe writes:

Motherhood only intensifies Martha’s estrangement. Caroline, Martha’s daughter, plays the role of double and rival to her mother. On the one hand, Caroline secures the love and acceptance from Mrs. Quest that Martha never realizes in her relationship with her mother. On the other hand, Caroline embodies the potential which Martha at 21 feels she has squandered in marriage. Indeed, the hours alone with Caroline provide a strange stimulus to Martha’s imagination as she begins to break through her own vagueness to an understanding of her situation.<sup>15</sup>

However, after some time Douglas comes back from the war. Martha dislikes Douglas and she also feels that she is not a good mother to Caroline. While Douglas is at the war, she writes letters to him. When she finds out that Douglas is seeing another girl, she loses interest in him. Instead of sending the letter with her real feelings, she tears it and writes another with fake feelings. The feeling of leaving Douglas and Caroline comes to her

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<sup>14</sup> Sceats, Sarah. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction.*(United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000)75

<sup>15</sup> Rowe, Margaret Moan. *Women Writers: Doris Lessing.*( London: Macmillan, 1994)33

mind. She starts to take part in some communist party meeting in order to make herself busy. As Margaret Moan writes:

...Her experience with Caroline, the war which takes Douglas to another part of the colony and brings in British soldiers, and her own growing political awareness lead finally to Martha's recognition that 'She did not feel like Douglas's wife or Caroline's mother' (591). That recognition precipitates not just angry exchanges but also domestic violence which Lessing describes most effectively.<sup>16</sup>

The novel *A Proper Marriage* is based on Lessing's real life experiences. Like Martha, Lessing also abandoned her husband and small children in order to pursue her career. Like Martha, Lessing also had faith in communist ideology. As Carole Klein writes:

*A Proper Marriage*, the second volume of the *Children of Violence* series, won Lessing some of her most devoted fans because the novel not only demythologized pregnancy and birth, it revealed the ambivalence of motherhood. Feelings that have never been connected, at least so openly, to this experienced startled readers even as it made them feel less ashamed that they too had left resentment mixed with love, a sense of entrapment with protective impulses. Lessing explored this experience skillfully in her fiction.<sup>17</sup>

In the meantime, after Douglas's returns from war, he buys a house in the older part of the city. Mrs. Quest is happy that Martha has a big house, a child and a loving husband by her side. She thinks that now her life is secure. Martha is more involved with her communist party world. Getting involved with communist party meetings, she is paving her way out of the household and family. Usually she used to leave Caroline in the hands of a servant girl. Douglas didn't like that. Mrs. Quest once said that Martha is ruining her daughter Caroline as she is not giving her enough time. This makes Martha so angry that she shouts: "You bought me and my brother up the way you wanted, don't you think I

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<sup>16</sup> Margaret Moan 34-35

<sup>17</sup> Klein, Carole. *Doris Lessing: A Biography*. (Great Britain: Redwood Books, 2000) 64

should be allowed to do the same with my children” (602). Sometimes Mrs. Quest used to come to Martha’s house and inspect everything. She is not satisfied the way Martha leaves the house in the hands of servants. Martha feels her mother is still nagging her and her household, and influencing Douglas. Martha feels the suffocation inside her. She always wanted a free life, away from her mother and her influences. As a left-wing supporter she wanted to live her life her own way.

In addition, this novel *A Proper Marriage* is related to Martha’s confused struggle to bring part of her dreams into being. Lessing presents Martha as an exemplary figure through paradigmatic states of consciousness and social placement. Martha’s conventional marriage which is meant for reproduction before the deluge of the Second World War ends in stereotypical failure. Martha denies following the tradition set by her mother- being a housewife who is constantly nagging and crossing the boundaries of privacy. In being a daughter of such a mother, she feels that she would act the same way with her daughter. In order to break that tradition Martha must leave Douglas and Caroline. She walks out of her marriage, seeing the abandonment of her daughter as an act of emancipation for the benefit of her child. As Kate Fullbrook writes:

As the women characters shed parents, husbands, lovers, children, take up jobs, work in politics and in the arts, as they move, in short, into the kinds of autonomy and self-definition that women writers earlier in the century had so strenuously claimed as needs for women, they confront new problems, new aspects of bondage and unease. Lessing both records the change in women’s status and roles, and outlines the emergent problems related to freedom and necessities which that change uncovers. Her women reared for individual happiness through responsibility for the minute collective of the family, now examine other possibilities for social placement. As they live through the historical dissolution of their traditional roles they confront central questions of liberty, responsibility and happiness with fresh eyes, and with no guidelines to hand. They become explorers

of the unapproved philosophical ground onto which Lessing believes we must move.<sup>18</sup>

Towards the end of the novel Martha had fight with Douglas. She was beaten badly by him. In order to take refuge, she goes to her parent's house. But instead of letting her inside, her mother closes the door and her father turns away. Though she has determined to leave her daughter and husband, in her heart she has a hope that perhaps her marriage can be saved by the help of her parents. As she marries to fulfill the expectations of her mother she was wishing her mother will help her to get rid of the problems regarding her and Michael. The novel ends with Martha leaving her baby girl, husband and house. She moves out of the house with her "clothes" and "books". It is through "books" that Martha got mentally enlightened and through "clothes" that her bodily enlightenment emerged. Those two things "books" and "clothes" were her reason for survival and she moves along with her belongings. To conclude, Martha left the responsibilities towards her family in order to serve and work for the party.

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<sup>18</sup> Fullbrook, Kate. *Free Women: Ethics and Aesthetics in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990) 147

## Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to explore the lives of two of Lessing's women protagonist: Kate and Martha and their journey into finding their real selves in *The Summer Before the Dark*, *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*. These women are intelligent and the knowledge they get from reading books helps them in finding their identity. Finding self or identity means being conscious about oneself and to know oneself. Furthermore, Lessing's women leave their home in search of their identity. In both the novels Kate and Martha leave their home, husband and children for the quest of knowledge. "Books" and "Clothes" play important role in the lives of these women. Both Kate and Martha are fond of reading books. This helps them in gaining the spiritual knowledge. Clothes make them physically aware about themselves.

Kate in *The Summer Before the Dark* is the wife of Michael and the mother of four children. She doesn't have her own identity. She is either Mrs. Michael or the mother of Stephen, Eileen, James and Tim. After she gets a job as a translator, her journey to knowledge begins. She travels to Turkey mothering the delegates of global food. Similarly, she travels to Spain mothering Jeffery. Later on in London she mothers Maureen. The seal dream helps her to break this chain of mothering and taking care of others. She learns to say "No" to other's request. Furthermore, she also learns that self always comes first.

Martha in *Martha Quest* leaves home in order to know the purpose of her life. As she is a modern woman, she didn't want to follow the footsteps of her mother. As she is also a voracious reader, Martha always believes in knowledge and knowledge helps her to survive in the town. She is extremely aware of her body. In order to get into the clothes, she starves herself. Late night parties and alcohol makes her life miserable. After having failed love affairs, she knows the purpose of her life. She wants to do something worthwhile and make use of her knowledge.

In *A Proper Marriage* Martha leaves her daughter Caroline and husband Douglas in order to pursue her career as a communist party worker. Martha never had a good relationship with her mother. Mrs. Quest was always nagging Martha to do things her way. Martha didn't want the same to happen between her and Caroline. In spite of having a big house, servants and a husband, Martha leaves everything behind to serve and work for the communist party.

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