



A CRITICAL STUDY OF DORIS LESSING'S *THE CLEFT AND CHILDREN OF VIOLENCE*

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ABSTRACT

*Winner of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature, Doris Lessing wrote across a range of genres and detailed the conflicts inherent to a changing society. Throughout her life, Lessing rarely shied away from speaking of her mind. She was barred for years from entering both Rhodesia and South Africa because she expressed her disapproval of white minority rule. Following the crackdown in Hungary in 1956, she turned away from communism. The present paper is an attempt to find out the main theme of Doris Lessing's selected novels, *The Cleft* and the series of novels, *Children of Violence*. It gives a detailed critical study of Doris Lessing's novel, *The Cleft* and the series novel, *Children of Violence*.*

INTRODUCTION

In the novel, *The Cleft*, [2007] Doris Lessing posits, an old Roman senator, brooding at his later stage of life. He embarks on what will be his last endeavour – the retelling the story of human creation. It recounts the history of the Clefts, an ancient community of women living in an Edenic, coastal wilderness, confined within the valley of an overshadowing mountain. The Clefts have no need nor knowledge of men – childbirth is controlled, like the tides that lap around their feet, through the cycles of the moon, and their children are often female. But with the unheralded birth of a strange, new child – a boy – the harmony of their community is suddenly thrown into jeopardy. In this fascinating and beguiling novel, Lessing encounters the theme that inspired much of her early writing: how men and women, two similar and yet

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thoroughly distinct creatures, manage to live side by side in the world, and how the specifics of gender affect every aspect of our existence.

Martha Quest [1952] is the first book of the series *Children of Violence*. In this full-scale portrait of a girl from adolescence to womanhood, Doris Lessing does for her sex what D. H. Lawrence and Arnold Bennett did for their in *Sons and Lovers* and *Clayhanger*. To feminine sensibility and perception, Doris Lessing multiplies an unusual directness, vigour and energy to produce a remarkable combination of talents.

It is essentially a story of rebel. When we first meet her, she is a girl of fifteen living on an impoverished African farm with her parents. She proves to be a girl of passionate vitality, avid for experience and for self-knowledge. She is bitterly resentful of the conventional narrowness of her home life. From this background, she breaks away to take a job as a typist in the local capital, and here, in the world of the big city, she begins to encounter the real life, she is so eager to experience and perceive.

The background of Martha is the story of Africa, the place of birth of Doris Lessing: the tough, spacious and yet circumscribed life of the Veld farms. No doubt, it posits the corrosive atmosphere of racial fears and antagonisms. It shows the superficial democracy and sophistication of city life. As a picture of colonial life, *Martha Quest* is fascinated by the depth and realism of its insight. She often is at its centre. Her figure shows that of a character in grand manner. It is conceived in sympathetic understanding, but drawn with an unerring objectivity.

A Proper Marriage [1954] is the second book of the series, *Children of Violence*. It of course can be read as a separate novel. It carries on the story which Doris Lessing began so promisingly in *Martha Quest*. In it, Martha was in her mid-teens. She left the South African farm on which she was brought up to seek the excitement and experience she craved in 'the big city'. Although rapidly disillusioned, she was inescapable drawn into the hectic life of the smart set and soon found herself married.

A Proper Marriage shows how Martha's rebellious temperament reacted to her new life. There is her growing discontent with the young married set to which she and her husband, Douglas now belong. The arrival of her baby, which seems another threat to her freedom, gives a new turn to her life. There is the outbreak of war, and Douglas departs with the army. Later, by exerting a hard decision, Martha has to make about their life together.



A Ripple from the Storm [1958] is the third novel of the series of *Children of Violence*. It describes how a Communist group blew into existence in a small town in Central Africa, as a result of the general mood of optimism, enthusiasm and admiration for the Soviet Union current in the years 1942, 1943, and 1944. Martha Quest is divorced from her husband. She is now involved with this group and married the leader of it, a German refugee.

A Ripple from the Storm is an attempt to describe the psychology of the group organizes against the society. The novel very radically portrays the psychology of the individual in an individualistic society trying to behave as 'communal man'. By the end of the novel, it is apparent that the group has failed. Thus, the novel combines both sympathy and objectivity to a remarkable degree. The novel is no doubt of the same high standards, both in artistic achievement and in its humanity.

Landlocked [1965] is the fourth novel of the series, *Children of Violence*. The time is the last few months of a war that had not only ruined Europe, but had flooded a message of equality even into this backwater. Some of the white people have already sensed the imminence of change: they could never again unthinkingly hold down this corner of Africa for themselves and their heirs.

The Four-Gated City [1969] is the concluding and fifth novel from the series, *Children of Violence*. In *The Four-Gated City*, Doris Lessing moves the setting from Southern Rhodesia, Southern Africa to London. Martha Quest is seen in London in post Second World War. She is integral part of the social history of the time – the Cold War, the Aldermaston Marches, Swinging London, the deeping of poverty and social anarchy. The novel ends with the century in the grip of World War Three. In the year 1997, Martha dies on a contaminated island off the northwest coast of Scotland. Most of the people of Britain have died before her, in 1978, of multiple afflictions: bubonic plague, nerve gases and nuclear explosions.

The novel criticizes on the medical profession. It is suggested that the medical inventions day by day are destroying that part of humanity which is in fact sensitive to evolution. It criticizes the scientists who have created and perpetuate a climate in which 'rationalism' has become a new God. The novel further explores the possibilities of people having 'extra-sensory perception', in varying degrees, but have been brainwashed into suppressing it, and that schizophrenia is the name of our blindest contemporary prejudice.

Thus, the series, *Children of Violence* follows the life of protagonist, Martha Quest, from the age of fifteen in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, through adolescence and a marriage shaped by the Second World War. Considering the significance the series and the writer, it



was C. P. Snow, who wrote of Doris Lessing in *The Sunday Times*, especially when *Martha Quest* appeared:

"She is one of the most powerfully equipped young novelists now writing."
[1952]

In a nutshell, Doris Lessing proves to be one of the towering novelists of the time. She gave a portrayal of the painful features of humanity i.e. latest invention of science causing destruction to entire creatures on the earth.

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