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Interview

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Abstract

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Doris Lessing

INTERVIEW

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Mrs Lessing, perhaps we may begin by speaking a little about the relationship between your early life in Southern Rhodesia, growing up on the veld, and what you describe as the gift of your solitary childhood. If I may relate you to your heroine, Martha Quest. In one of your early novels you describe 'the gift of her solitary childhood on the veld' as 'that knowledge of something painful and ecstatic, something central and fixed but flowing. A sense of movement, of separate things interacting and finally becoming one but greater. It was this which was her loadstone, even her conscience'. I would like to ask you if you would perhaps expand a little upon the sense in which you use the word 'conscience' there, because I feel that this may not be altogether clear to many readers.

Well, I think I'm using it in a sense that it is a feeling that you measure other things against. But it's very hard to describe, of course, because what I was describing in Martha Quest was that kind of ecstatic experience that many adolescents do in fact have. It's very common to adolescents, and I think perhaps it's overvalued.

Is it a romantic ecstasy?

Oh, I don't know if it's romantic, no, but it's extremely common. You'll find it described in a great deal of religious literature too. It's not an uncommon thing, but it is a reminder perhaps that life is not quite so black and white or cut and dried as we sometimes make it, and if you

have had this kind of thing happen to you then it's something to refer back to, if you are about to make things too over-simplified.

May I ask you if this conscience is the individual conscience of which you speak in the essay A Small Personal Voice where you speak of the importance of dealing with the individual conscience in its relationship with the collective. Is that a different conscience?

Well, I hadn't thought of relating them, I must say. In *A Small Personal Voice* I was preoccupied at that particular time — it was the mid-fifties — with how being a member of political parties or groups or collectives of various kinds can in fact pervert you and make you tell lies. Now this was something that not only I, but very, very many people were thinking about at that time, indeed all the people I knew at that time were thinking about it in one way or another. Some people in fact had suffered very deeply because of it. I lived in England, and I hadn't suffered, but people from Europe, from the communist countries, and from America, where the Cold War was something fairly savage, had done a lot of thinking, and that got into my essay because I was, and am, concerned at the way you can sell yourself out under pressure from other people. It's extremely easy to do, particularly when you think you are in the right about something. This is the essence of politics. You know that you are in the right. It's also the essence of religions which are right by definition. If I were to re-write this essay, I wouldn't perhaps put the emphasis now where I did then, but I still think that in a time when we are more and more institutionalized — because this is what is happening to us — more and more expected to be group people and members of collectives, it's extremely important for us to try and decide what *we* think, what *I* think as an individual. It's extremely hard to separate it, you know.

The individual conscience, then, that you speak of in that essay is a moral conscience, and perhaps the conscience that you speak of in the novel referring to the ecstatic experience in childhood is a much deeper thing. But it seems to me that in your work the two are intimately related, that the sense in which we use the word 'conscience' is perhaps a highly spiritual one rather than what I suppose many readers would take to be a matter of political viewpoint or leaning or even the orthodox moral conscience.

You see, I think one shouldn't get these two things confused because dealing with ordinary life, day to day life, in our relationships with

groups or institutions, I do not think one needs to use anything very high-flown or mystical. It seems to me that the problem there is rather different. It's a question of the conditioned conscience there, what has been conditioned into me by society, and what the individual conscience, as far as we can be aware of it, is saying. This problem of the conditioned conscience is one that isn't lightly pushed aside, just watch any child being brought up. From the moment this unfortunate being draws breath it is being told 'you are good', 'you are bad', 'what a good little baby you are' — all this goes on throughout every person's life and it's always a question of what is convenient for the parents or society because every child is some kind of wild animal that has to be tamed, otherwise no one can deal with it. It has to be, but there has to be a point where any one of us says all my 'you are good, you are bad' comes from society. Now that is the conditioned conscience which, I think, is our biggest prisoner. You see, when you are standing face to face with your group, which happens more and more in this rather unpleasant world of ours, then you have to decide what is speaking, is it 'you are a good little boy, you are a bad little boy', that you are brought up with, because the collective and institution always talks to the good little boy or the bad little boy or good little girl. That is the strength of institutions and politics and states and armies and the lot. They can go straight into your childhood conditioning 'Oh, he's such a good little boy, such a good little girl'. That is where they get us all the time. And now this other thing which is ... this other conscience, this sense of something much deeper is something you build on, particularly as a writer. It's something that you allow — I cook a lot — allow to simmer there, simmer quietly there, and cook so that you look at it from time to time and see what it's getting up to. I am of course talking about the unconscious.

You have clarified an important point for me and I think it gets to the heart of one of the problems that I think you have felt in the reception of your work. You have been at some pains to stress for example that the African stories are not about the colour problem and that The Golden Notebook is not a trumpet, as you put it, for women's liberation. Also I think that perhaps your political affiliation to the Communist party for a very short time was a personal rather than an ideological matter. Would it be true, then, to infer that the reader is perhaps often too attached to the 'ism' for which he is looking so that he does not read your work necessarily in the spirit in which it was written.

You see, all of these things are experiences I've been through, so they

find a place in my work. But, you know, there are about three questions you put into one there. About *The Golden Notebook*; the whole point of *The Golden Notebook* when I was writing it was the opposite of what it was taken to be. I had spent a lot of my time breaking things down into categories and classifying things and making either/ors and blacks and whites of everything, I'd come to realize that it was psychologically, psychically, an extremely dangerous thing to do and the people that I've known in my life who've done it have invariably broken down and cracked up, particularly in religion and politics. So the thesis of *The Golden Notebook* was the opposite of what it was taken to be. You know these thoughts that you suddenly have and you can't understand why you never had them before. It was one of those thoughts that prompted *The Golden Notebook*, the thought that there's something in the way our minds are set up, created or conditioned that makes us think of what divides people instead of what separates them. So we all of us all the time, if I say black and you say white, will instantly think of what divides the black and the white or divides men and women, and I have been trying ever since then to try not to do this and to try and see in fact what we have in common which is much more important.

Your preoccupation, then, is with unity.

Yes, I think it's very important. We've got to learn to think like this.

When you spoke in the Preface to the second edition of The Golden Notebook of the necessity for a search for a world ethic, I take it that this is an aspect of that unity that you speak of.

I talked about Marxism being an attempt at a kind of world ethic outside religion. Well, of course Marxism, as far as I am concerned, is a religion, it has all the same characteristics. But what Marxism at its best does is to look at the world as a whole and see the different parts of it interacting. That's how it is as a theory, not what happens to it when it's put into practice. And that is very appealing, I think, to young people particularly. Generation after generation falls in love with Marxism, and I think nearly always for the same reasons. It's because looking around at what we can all see, and it doesn't get any prettier, Marxism is presented ideologically as something that sees Man as a whole, and it takes some time, some experience to see that the theory and practice have got absolutely nothing to do with each other.

The practice, then, for a humane novelist is to find a convincing alternative to this very appealing all-embracing ideology.

I don't look for ideologies any more, oh no. What I do think is that the different classes of the world have got to start acting as a whole, or we are going to do ourselves in, politically, but that is not an ideological thought. It's a practical one.

Were you inspired by certain writers?

You must remember that I was stuck in a very provincial place with no one to talk to. I had no one at all to discuss anything with. When I say no one, I mean no one. I was reading quietly there by myself and I was reading the most extraordinary collection of writers. If I listed them your mind would split with amazement, like Proust for example, I'm quite sure that at that time I must have been one of the world experts on Proust. I also knew Tolstoy and Stendhal and so on. I can go on indefinitely, so of course I was influenced, but I do not know who I was influenced by particularly. I think I was influenced much more by a kind of largeness of attitude, which is what you find in 'great literature', which was the opposite of anything around me. This was Salisbury, Rhodesia, bigoted, narrow, colour-bar society where nothing was ever discussed excepting the colour bar, or sport, or gossip. Literature was my safety line, something to hold on to.

I was struck by your comments about The Story of an African Farm. You speak of its obvious flaws, but then you speak of its quality as a work on the frontiers of experience which redeems whatever flaws it may have of structure and conception. I wonder if you would be kind enough to say a little more about what you had in mind with regard to the quality of that novel.

Well, the least important part, I think, is the feminism which is, as it were, the intellectual motivation, I think. She was bitterly conscious of the position of women in the nineteenth century. (In passing I would like to say that if somebody wanted to condemn me to some vicious prison sentence they could condemn me to live as a woman in the nineteenth century. It must have been utter hell.) While she was fighting this particular battle all her life, and fighting it well, she was also preoccupied all the time with other things. There's a central place in that book

where this very clumsy, inarticulate farm boy, Waldo, talks to his stranger — you know they both have strangers, Lindell has her stranger who is a half sexual object and, I felt, perhaps not very important — but the real stranger is Waldo's stranger who talks to him of the meaning of life, and that is really the core of that book. It's not a subtle book any more than *Wuthering Heights* is. *Wuthering Heights* is an appalling novel. Have you ever sat down to analyse it? It's dreadful, but it doesn't really matter, does it? And I think the same is true of *An African Farm*, because if you wanted to pull *An African Farm* to bits, you could do a very good job of it. But it's redeemed because of the spirit of the book. All the time she's trying to come to terms with what life is all about. This is what her writing is really about.

I would like to ask a few questions about The Grass is Singing. How did this novel evolve? I have read that you originally intended to centre it upon the figure of Marston.

It was originally two thirds as long again. What happened was I wrote — based on a little newspaper I'd kept... and I'd kept *that* because of gossip I'd heard as a child about a woman, a farmer on some near farm, and her relations with a cook-boy and the unease of the white people discussing it. Now it was not suggested that this was a straightforward sexual thing. What was suggested was that she was asking for it, with comments like my father's: 'There was a French queen who used to dress, and undress in front of her servants because they were not people to her.' That stuck in my mind. I gave up my job as a typist because I said to myself, 'You are always saying you are a writer, but where's the evidence?' I was then faced with writing a novel, and what was it going to be about? A third was the existing novel. There was also a great mass which was social satire and it couldn't possibly have been any good because I had then hardly been out of Rhodesia, and you have to have some kind of comparisons to make satire. So I just ripped off this two-thirds. The original plot was that this young Englishman, full of idealism — they were always turning up in Rhodesia, they never lasted for one reason or another longer than about a year — this idealistic young Englishman turned up and actually was confronted with this extremely basic, sordid and, above all, enigmatic incident because no one would tell the truth about it, nor bring it out in the open. When discussing this incident, the white farmers and the white farmers' wives on their verandas never said anything like 'We can't have a black man screwing a white woman' or anything like that, or 'How immoral!' It was always

ambiguous and wrapped up. This is what struck me as a child, and this is what that novel came out of.

It has always seemed to me that your treatment of Mary Turner and of Dick Turner is a compassionate one; that you satirized the extreme figures, but not the central figures.

I hadn't satirized Mary Turner and Dick Turner at all. No, I satirized the whole of the white community, using Marston as a focus. The satirical part of the book had nothing to do with the Turners. What I had to change was Marston.

May I ask you if the second epigraph which you put at the front of the novel is invented?

You know, that I couldn't remember. The thing was I'd written it in a notebook and I hadn't got an attribution and I didn't know whether I'd invented it or whether I'd read it, so I put 'anonymous'.

But it is of course very apt not only for this novel but for many of the stories that you have written. It seems that in so many of your African stories, as in The Grass is Singing, your imagination is moved by the spectacle not of brutality or insensitivity, but of muddling incapacity to cope. Is this simply an instinctive, intuitive way of dealing with it, or is it really a deliberate looking back?

Well, now I can intellectualize it and say I think that this is how most people are, but I suppose it must have been my experience. I was running through stories in my mind as you spoke, trying to think which fitted this description.

One thinks of another woman, like Mrs Gale for example, the way in which she is treated when she confronts the young girl who is full of ecstasy and passion.

No, that was when I was trying to contrast the English and the Afrikaners, that English kind of cold upper-class thing and the Afrikaners who are very simple and direct.

But there is still, it seems to me, in your treatment of the cold and upper-class a sense of the pathos of this crippled sensibility.

Oh, yes. Well, Mrs Gale is a woman in prison; all of them are, aren't they?

Yes, indeed. The figure in The Grass is Singing, I suppose, who attracts the most comment is the figure of Moses, the boy, the African servant. Did you see him not so much as an individual as the essence of the African as the white sees him and fears him?

With the anonymity I tried to sum up how the white people would see someone like this because they wouldn't see him very much as an individual at all. If I had made Moses a very particularized individual, that would have thrown that novel completely out, it would have been a different novel. Supposing I re-wrote it from his point of view. For a start, I don't think I'd be able to do it, which is another thing.

Yes. In the long story 'Hunger' you did in fact do this, didn't you, and you did feel dissatisfied with it.

I felt dissatisfied with it because it was too over-simplified. The thing is I wrote *The Grass is Singing* in Rhodesia as a white person and my contact with the blacks as equals was just non-existent. It was always either as an employer or as a rather patronizing person, simply because that was how you were situated. You couldn't have a really equal relationship with a black person. We did have a kind of political relationship, but they were not equal. If you are meeting black people who have to be home at nine o'clock to beat the curfew while you sit around in the office when they've gone and you can go off to a restaurant which they can't go to, no amount of ideology is going to turn this into an equal relationship, it's just not possible. I'd had no equal relationships with black people. By the time I'd come to write 'Hunger' I'd lived in England for quite a long time and I'd known a great many Africans and Jamaicans, and so on, as people. I no longer thought in terms of colour. I remember once how I realized that I really was on my way to being cured from colour feeling when an Indian turned up in my flat unannounced and asked me to do something. I disliked him as a person and I said 'Get out' and I thought 'My God, I'm cured' because it never crossed my mind that I mustn't be unkind to a dark-skinned person.

When you embarked on The Grass is Singing, and in fact on all your African writing, did you have any previous writers about Africa in mind at all? Did you feel this has been done and it must be done differently by

me? Did you have a sense of relationship to those who'd gone before you, or did you feel completely alone as it were in treating this?

You mean with *The Grass is Singing*? No, I didn't have anything to take it from at all. No, I didn't.