

"The Other" and Cultural Identity in Doris Lessing's Martha Quest

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Abstract: Doris Lessing is a white colonist from Britain with both Diaspora and marginal identity which gives her a special inspiration for writing the novel *Martha Quest*. The protagonist, Martha's painful experiences and tangled emotions are the real portrayal of Lessing's childhood. This article presents an in-depth analysis of "the Other" and the identity of culture, which reveals the exile, especially for white women are isolated from both colony and patriarchal society and are considered as "the Other" excluding from the European culture even African culture. It can be seen that the pursuit of cultural identity, freedom and independence in the context of heterogeneous culture is the spirit of this novel, and the writer, Lessing.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, *Martha*, "The Other", Cultural identity

1. Introduction

Doris May Lessing (1919-2013), the British writer, was born in Persia (now Iran) and moved to the British colony in Southern Rhodesia with her family in 1925, where she had an uneven mixed childhood of pleasure and pain. As a writer with multiple identities and a complex cultural background, Lessing became both a marginal and an exile on account of being a woman and a British colonist in Africa, which has had a profound influence on her belief and works, especially for her continuously critical thinking upon western traditional culture. Lessing wrote around 50 books including a series of genres, which were set in the colonial life and experiences in Africa, to reflect cultural conflicts, racial discrimination and to resist traditional patriarchal values as well as traditional mainstream values of the white society. Her writing career spanned more than half a century. After winning almost all of European world-class literary prizes, in 2007, Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Martha Quest is the first volume of a five-novel sequence *Children of Violence*, published in 1952, which centers on a 15-year-old girl, Martha, growing up in southern Africa while coming from England to find the identity during her adolescence. Another four books are *A proper Marriage* (1954), *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), *Landlord* (1965) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969), which are all based on the Lessing's intense experience of being a cross-cultural writer. According to Pickering (1990)[1], *Quest*, the family name indicates the nature of the protagonist is exploring, with the theme of her search to find herself and to figure out the answers to the following questions: "What constitutes the individual---that is, what is identity? What is its proper relation to the collective and the whole?". Therefore, the story of Martha's resistance is actually a identity finding history, which demonstrates adolescent' resistance is not a negative deviation behavior, but a positive performance to explore the identity. *Children of Violence Series* discuss the relationship between individual and collective, and *Martha Quest*, the first in the Series and the most significant volume in Lessing's early African novels, represents a rebellious girl, full of the revolt against the barriers of patriarchal society to find the "self". Her parents migrated from Britain to Southern Rhodesia (Africa) for two reasons: one was to get rich through growing crops in one year after they saw an exhibition in London; the other was to relax spirit on such a pristine and natural African continent because her father, Mr. Quest was a British officer in Iran, suffering depression and weak financial situation after the First World War. However, the colony was full of backwardness and poverty, and he could not make his dream of the sudden wealth real. Martha's mother, Mrs. Quest was a nurse with good educational background before moving to the colony, meanwhile, she was a traditional white British woman supporting male-dominated society and self-righteous, most importantly, she was a racist and possessive mother. Jonathan, Martha's younger brother, was in an expensive school although he was not intelligent as his sister, Martha. In general, this novel is based on the writer, Doris Lessing's own experiences in Africa and her spirituality. To some extent, it is the symbol of Lessing's identity of being a restless seeker and an exile who always feels on the edge of contradiction and conflict in African life.

This essay is mainly about the heroine, Martha, how she explores to find own cultural identity through "the Other" and how she deals with from torment adolescence to early womanhood in order to survive. Martha's dual identity, one is a white colonialist who belongs to the ruling class, but she shows strong sympathy for black people and hates the brutality and ruthlessness of the white ruling class; another is a white woman who has been marginalized from the gender perspective by the white mainstream. Martha Quest, like Doris Lessing, lives in the midst of cultural shock and the margin of mainstream society, focuses on the same group of people which illustrates her sympathy, understanding of the underprivileged and humanitarian thinking. Through analyzing "the Other" and cultural identity of Martha Quest, it reveals the character of the colonized and women who are regarded as "the Other", even further to analyse the identity problems they encounter in the process of cultural identity transmutation and heterogeneous cultural conflict.

2. "The Other" Analysis in Martha Quest

"The Other" originates from the history of western philosophy in the dichotomy of "the Self" and "the Other". In Western literature, "the Other" represents fantasy, desire and imagination, projected to the whole world by colonists, which is considered as the romanticization or demonization of the non-European world. Especially for the depiction of Africa in western literature, whether imagined as an eternal and peaceful utopia or an unmanageable and evil primitive continent, it is always devalued, distorted and pitted against western civilization. With the end of the colonial era and advent of globalization, the critical theory of "the Other" has gradually profound cultural connotation. Women in the eyes of colonial people and white men are marginal and subordinate, being treated as "the Other" of the alienated group by whites. And other Postcolonial critics, Stuart & Gay argued "the Other" is closely linked to cultural identity, which is an important element of postcolonial studies involving such questions as "who I am", "where I come from" and "who I will be" (1996)[2]. Hence, identity is always in a process of changing and transformation influenced by a variety of factors such as colonization, race, nationality and gender.

2.1. The Constraint of Colonialism

The white colonists, even though are the political rulers and institutional administrators, they become exiles instead of masters of this continent from the perspectives of culture, moral and ethics when they landed on Africa from the first day. Hence, the white settlers, as conquerors, are forced to isolate themselves from the indigenous people in terms of living space and culture.

In Chapter 1, it begins with a description of Martha's home on a farm, "the house, was in the centre of a vast basin, which was bounded by mountains" (Lessing, 2001)[3]. The location of the colonist farms is usually the centre of the basin, while the local black residence live in the edge of the farms. Compared with white people's brick houses, the blacks' are thatched. Thus, colonists take the living environment as a criterion of racial boundaries, forming a gap between centre and periphery, civilization and wildness. With the help of Joss, Martha is able to move to the town in order to seek freedom and independence. The building of this colonial city is characterized by British style, which presents a distinctly different architecture from traditional African culture. And Martha's workplace, "the Offices of Robinson" divides the town into two parts, left side is low thin roofs and shanty like structures for Kaffir and Indian stores as well as the slum of the coloured people, built in the 1890s; while the right side is gleaming white buildings fronted with grass where is modern. Based on the descriptions of building features in the town, it shows distinct lifestyles of different groups in Africa.

In the context of the colonialism, Martha, as a British, is forced to be "the Other" in the eyes of the African natives, like other Anglo--colonists who are all from the suzerain. On the other hand, she is a British diaspora, leaving from the homeland without identity and root, so Martha is "the Other" from the point of view of British. And Martha's long-standing colonial discourse and the innate sense of racial superiority has isolated herself from African cultural identity, which leads to her the marginal life between European and African doors full of contradictions and paradoxes.

2.2. The Margin of Racism

In African colony, Southern Rhodesia, there are not only white colonists, but also blacks, Afrikaners, Jews and other minorities. The Quests belongs to the poor whites, living in South Africa and being unable to integrate themselves into African life on account of the strong sense of white superiority. So, they are

"the Other" dissociated from the mainstream culture.

The black people in colony are in "the Other" position as well. They have no voice, who are seen as animals like dogs and the machine working for the whites. Racial discrimination happens everyday in the colony. If a native rapped a white girl, then he would be hung and the girl would be a national heroine, but if he was a white man who rapped a black girl, and fined only five pounds (Lessing, 2001)[3]. Martha discloses the inequality between races and difficulties for blacks to survive. Mrs. Quest claimed Daniel, the black servant, stole her missed pearl brooch and sent for the police to give him a good hiding in spite of his denying, although Martha's mother found it in the storeroom after she dismissed Daniel, she still insisted he was a thief in any case. In her view, all the blacks are pilferers and liars, and even the dirty, nasty and disgusting rubbish.

The Jews and other minority groups are considered as "the Other" in the colony, and they are isolated and careful to live in a special space. Under the background of anti-Semitism, Jews are marginalized and looked down upon by the whites. "Jews never were a subject people, at least not in Europe... They are men on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused. The emancipated Jew was, and is, historically and typically the marginal man" (Park, 1928)[4]. "The Cohens in the Martha Quest were Jewish and almost completely separated in the district, the farmers nodded to them, offered remarks about the weather, but never friendship" (Lessing, 2001)[3]. So, Mrs. Quest always opposes that Martha should not have associations with the Cohen brothers, and she believes they would have negative influence on her daughter. Another vivid representative of Jewish in this book is Adolph, he is always eager to fit in with the white group, but is very aware of his exclusion, even as "the scum from Eastern Europe" (p. 204)[3]. Then, he becomes extremely inferior and loses the ability and confidence to pursue own happiness. Martha becomes a lifeline when she appears in Adolph's life. He takes measures to degrade himself in front of Martha for sympathy in order to persuade her to stay with him, but when Martha unconsciously talks about wanting to have a child with him, Adolph feels she is being sarcastic and mocking him, because he realizes that "Martha would marry a good city father and become very respectable, then have five nice, well-brought-up children" (p. 210)[3].

And because of history and nationality, Afrikaners and Afrikaans are also discriminated in Southern Rhodesia. And they live in the position between the white colonists and blacks, as "the Other" from both politics and society. Martha's neighbor, Mrs. Van Rensburgs is the one of Afrikaans. The two families live in this farming district for many years, seeing to be very close but they are at odds in fact. Mrs. Van Rensburgs is the member of the Dutch Reformed Church, reading nationalist journals from the Union of South Africa, while the Quests, Church of England, subscribes Tory newspapers from England coming from what they respectively considered as Home. They talk about experiences and traditions with reservations apart from politics. As for Mr. Van Rensburgs, he takes Martha for the representative of the British, questioning the girl whether she admitted that the British behaved like beasts during the Boer War and claiming that the British are arrogant, rude and self-righteous. But for Martha, she makes friend with Marnie, Mrs. van Rensburg's daughter and takes the initiative to greet the family despite her mother's reproaches and objections. It could be seen that Martha is sympathetic to the minorities in the colony and thirsts for the racial equality.

In the dream of Martha, there is a golden city where all races of people live as equals without hatred and violence. In short, Martha is sympathetic to the Dutch in colonial South Africa and aspires to racial equality. From a humanitarian standpoint, It delicately describes tough suffering and survival of "the Other" in the colony, and draws attention to these marginal groups.

2.3. The Prejudice of Patriarchy

White women are pitiful in the colony because they are both marginalized by society for the gender and influenced by the oppression of patriarchy. Beauvoir declares society has always been men's and they treat women as "the Other" to prove themselves (Beauvoir, 1949)[5]. And women are dispersed to other lands with multiple identities, who have no security because they are not born in Britain, their homeland from cultural identity and have no position in this growing place (Broe, 1989)[6]. Obviously, in a colonial heterogeneous culture, white women, Diaspora, are marginal with mixed identities, which is extremely hard to recognize.

In Martha Quest, the independent girl, Martha, realizes she should separate herself from the shackled women of the past, from the suffocating family. She grows up with a love of extensive reading, which helps her enrich knowledge and learn more about freedom and equality. From Martha's childhood, she makes up her mind to choose a new life that is against her parents, particularly her mother and different

from traditional women. She does not want to be a fat, vulgar housewife like Mrs Van Rensberg, nor her mother, who is indignant, nagging and never dissatisfied (Lessing, 2001)[3]. Therefore, when Marnie, the neighbor, asks her if she marries young, Martha says she is willing to die compared with tying herself down with to babies and housekeeping. And in her family, Martha is not treated in the same way as her younger brother, Jonathan, because her birth was an accident to the Quests; however, her brother could have the advantages going to the "good school". Martha's adolescence is in the revolt against the supporters of colonial patriarchy, represented by her mother via cutting the childish dresses in to pieces which her mother prepared, ignoring her mother's warning about going through the bush alone even fleeing the educational path her mother has planned for her and living in the town regardless her mother's will, to pursue freedom and a entirely new life. Nevertheless, Martha is still "the Other" of being a woman, accepting a job as a secretary which does not match her abilities but is suitable for women in a such a patriarchal society. This alienation from her parents does not disappear until Martha leaves the farm to work in the city. After Martha moved to the city to work, her parents came to the town and visited her twice, but it did not make her feel any maternal love in contrast to hate because Mrs. Quest moved around the room and arranged the baggage according to her habits. Martha is eager to get rid of her mother's control, so she only read the first paragraph as usual then balls it up and throws into the wastepaper basket when she receives a letter from her mother; In fact, the only way Martha could rebel against patriarchy, supported by her mother is to stake her own stand on independence. There are also a series of arguments and conflicts with her mother over Martha's preparations for her marriage to Douglas, which is for her to escape from her mother, her family and the Patriarchal society although she realizes inwardly she is longing for their care and understanding.

Another objection to Patriarchy is about gender discrimination. Martha believes the first article for a girl is losing her virginity as romantically and as soon as possible (p.146)[3], but Donovan stooped Martha and said firmly he would not be teased, and gave her an impression of being impossible to make love with him. However, for Martha, she is willing to decide when and how to make love, which is a positive flag of independence in itself, a red and defiant flag. And Donovan, who is a traditional and strict British man, comments on Martha's dressing, behaviors even her hobbies, which makes Martha disgusted. He says to Martha, "you know what that dress needs, my dear? ... You must buy a black patent belt with a small, flat buckle" (p. 111)[3]. Martha becomes unconsciously obedient to him, dressing up for the party even though it is under the pressure from others. And "it was like being possessed by another personality; it was disturbing, and left her with a faint but pronounced distaste" (p.113)[3]. Nonetheless, Martha feels the pleasure of dressing for a man for the first time in her life. It is clear that Martha advocates women's right, but her behaviors have deviated from her mind, which makes her subordinate to men's criteria and becomes "the Other" in their eyes. Martha expects to make friends with a man who is wise, knowledgeable and respectful to woman because her thinking and desire is beyond a typical white man with traditional values. Men in the Sports Club treat Martha as a pretty woman, who is an entertaining accessory, and they like to conquer a fresh beautiful girl to prove their ability and masculinity. Hence, the standard for female in the colony is appearance and reproduction instead of career and intelligence. The role and voice of women is marginalized and even ignored, which is the primary reason why Martha looks painful and chaotic so that she has to revolt against man's behaviors and attitudes in the male-oriented society.

Martha also rebels against white's political stand in the colony. Joss recommends her to join in the discussion group, Left Book Club for getting new ideas, but when she is both disgusted and terrified by the sight of three women, all members, who are constantly scolding children and behaving in a fussed manner when the children begin to shriek. So, there is a fierce and strong voice inwardly, "I will not be like this" (p.133)[3]. It is obvious that Martha's resistance to the marginalization of women and "the Other" in the colony is explicit and sharp, reflecting her relentless seeking for a new era of female identity. Then she starts reading the Observer which provides opportunities for her to express criticism, develop affiliation and find the self. "As she turned the pages and the lines of print came gently up through her eyes to her brain, without assault, what she gained was a feeling of warmth, of security; for here were ideas which she had been defending guiltily for years, used as the merest commonplaces. She was at home, she was one of a brotherhood" (p. 136)[3]. Martha finds a place where she could have a clear direction to revolt, including politics, colonialism, racialism and gender discrimination.

In conclusion, "the Other" identity and "rootless" culture makes Martha experience strangeness, conflict and isolation during her childhood. And she is sensitive to recognize those who are excluded from the mainstream of society and who are neglected by the white colonists, showing them attention and sympathy.

3. Cultural identity analysis in Martha Quest

Identity is a continuous process of construction, which is seen to be "instituted in particular social and historical contexts" (Bennett, Grossberg & Morris, 2005)[7]. And the construction of identity is an act of authority, which leads to a constantly changing cultural identity in the context of history and reality and "is always in a struggle of resistance, negotiation and reconciliation"(Hall & Gay, 1996)[2]. Hence, people who are confused about the identity, struggle to find out "who I am", and try to reconstruct their identities.

3.1. Double identity and Diaspora experience

As a white British, born in Iran, then moved to South Africa, Martha undoubtedly is a Diaspora with multiple cultural identities, experiencing the conflicts between heterogeneous cultures and the consequent fragmentation and suffering of identity. For British, Martha is an exile in Africa with a sense of superiority for being a white of the Empire, longing for British life. But she is also tortured by the Patriarchal values without independence and freedom in the family, which exposes the survival and spiritual crisis of the white patriarchal society. Most women, like Martha, try to find themselves under the domination of patriarchal consciousness and gain recognition in the process of "socialization", but they are lost in a world controlled by men and suffered from married life. For African, Martha is the colonist on the other hand, standing for the majority of white British who have no experience and knowledge of running the farm even develop Africa but still persist in ruining this land for wealth. So, she is not belonging to Africa as well. It can be seen that Martha and other women with double identity are difficult to fully integrated into any countries and find harmony. They are isolated and marginal.

3.2. The attribution of European culture identity

Friedman (1991)[8] indicates Identity is a European and American cultural politics, which presents a modern polity based on the general progress and a political culture that has begun to turn to the politics of cultural identity in relation to gender, native and ethnic identity. Martha's identity of being a British makes her accept "the Other" consciously on the other hand passively. Her mother, Mrs. Quest is a loyal advocate of British culture, yearning for the return to London and even in the colony, she still retains the English way of life. In her eyes, everything in Britain is the best. So, she orders plenty of books from London for Martha, exposing her to British culture at an early age and reinforcing her with as much British education as possible, and expects her daughter to join balls of British upper class for a good marriage. This British upbringing has given Martha a strong sense of British cultural identity, which leads her to be an attachment towards British culture objectively. By contrast, Martha's cultural identity of Britain often makes her feel like a lonely exile. From the childhood, her impressions of England came from the novels of great writers such as Dickens and Eliot who depict a world extremely different from the reality, but these novelists were from another country. Therefore, Martha regards herself as "the Other" without position and identity to attribute.

3.3. The integration of African culture identity

As a British, Martha is excluded in the life of the colony although she opposes colonialism and racial discrimination and takes great offence at the humiliation to black people by the Southern Rhodesian colonists. There is an unbreakable barrier between her and South African blacks because the cultural identity of Martha is difficult to confirm and her parents are the supporters of racial system in South Africa. Moreover, Martha can not understand and fit into blacks' own custom, culture and affections. So, she is still the colonist, like other British colonists from British suzerain. Even though British colonists are the intruders and rulers in politics, they are spiritually rejected by the indigenous Africans.

To sum up, in the book of Martha Quest, the sense of strangeness, marginalization and alienation in the life of the heroine, Martha, comes from writer, Lessing's own experiences and feelings. Martha is the one to uncover cultural identity and paradoxes of the life for the writer, herself. The aim is to draw people's attention to criticize colonialism and eliminate racialism as well as gender discrimination, to concern about "the Other" and cultural identity of being Diaspora.

4. Conclusion

From Martha Quest, "the Other" and the double identity of Martha is a reflection of the writer,

Lessing's identity. Through analyzing "the Other" on the basis of the constraint of colonialism, margin of racism and the prejudice of patriarchy, it reveals that Diaspora, like Martha, with uncertain identities are still marginalized even though they are in the dominant position of the colony, and for minority group, the image of "the Other" is not optional and cannot be justified for historical and political reasons. As for cultural identity, British colonists, especially for white women, have been forced to be exiled to different countries with multiple identities, where they live is not the home from cultural identity and the birthplace, Britain, is actually not their homeland. Obviously, through Martha's experiences, Lessing indicates that in the colonial heterogeneous culture, Diaspora women have no voice and right to pursue freedom, equality and independence. Hence, searching for redefinition of "the Other" and cultural identity of Diaspora has profound influence on colonists.

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