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THE SUBDUED VOICES: POSTMEMORY IN DORIS LESSING'S *MARTHA QUEST* AND *ALFRED AND EMILY*

Dr. C.G. Shyamala
Assistant Professor
Post-graduate Department of English and
Research Centre for Comparative Studies
Mercy College, Palakkad, Kerala
cgsm2007@gmail.com

Abstract

Most of Doris Lessing's works are centred on her experiences, memories and the past. The repercussions of the Second World War, the concepts of Laing, the philosophy of Sufism and Communism form integral parts of her fiction because they are inseparable fragments of her life's experiences. The notable feature is that these influences have been transferred to her life and their representations in her fiction are on account of postmemory. This paper makes a comparative study of postmemory in Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* and *Alfred and Emily*, wherein the inherited experiences of the First World War forms part of the memories that pervade the consciousness of the characters who are not involved in the war, but they turn out helpless victims of postmemory.

Key Words: autobiography/memoir, postmemory, war, trauma, displaced etc.

My Father Bleeds History- Art Spiegelman

"That war, the Great War that would end all war, squatted over my childhood. The trenches were as present to me as anything I actually saw around me. And here I still am, trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free" (*Alfred* viii)

These lines from the "Foreword" to Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* succinctly portray the attempts of the narrator to secede from the "monstrous legacy" of the First World War that has imprisoned her thoughts and crippled her memories. The repercussion of the war, the bondage of an unknown history, which is the legacy that she mentions, seems to have permeated her psyche and infringed upon her sensibility. This paper makes a comparative study of"postmemory" in Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* and *Alfred and Emily*, where the inherited experiences of the First World War forms a part of the memories that pervade the consciousness of the characters who are not directly involved in the war, but they turn out to be the helpless victims of "postmemory" that have to make efforts to surpass the thoughts of an unlived and inexperienced history.

Coined by Marianne Hirsche, the term "postmemory"[1] relates to the trauma and burden of the previous generation that is carried down to the second or forthcoming generations with particular emphasis on the Holocaust survivors. Hirsch does not restrict "postmemory" to the Holocaust but encompasses the experiences of the future generations that go through the trauma of mass destruction or catastrophe of one form or the other. Hirsch opines:

> Postmemory describes the relation that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, cultural trauma of those who came before - to experiences they remember only by stories, images and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute "memories" in their own right. ("The Generation" 103).

The second-generation survivors remember the experiences of the preceding generation through stories, images or behaviours because they are deeply etched in their minds; albeit the incidents do not belong to them and these events cannot be fully understood or recreated by the second-generation survivors. "Postmemory" becomes characteristic of the experiences of those who grow to be influenced by the accounts of the previous generation, "shaped by traumatic events that can neither be fully ?? understood nor re-created" ("Past" 662). They do not know where they exactly belong, since the past encroaches upon their present in a domineering way.

"Postmemory," according to Hirsch, is "received memory…*distinct* from the recall of contemporary witnesses and participants"and memory could be transmitted to those who did not live the event ("The Generation" 106). She regards "postmemory" to be a "*structure* of inter- and trans- generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove" (106). This means that "postmemory" is not "an *identity* position but a *generational* structure of transmission deeply embedded in … forms of mediation" (114). Hirsch recognises memory, family and photography to be the three essential elements that form the trans-generational structure of postmemory in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Hirsch labels the second-generation as the "hinge generation" ("Past"662). This "hinge generation" struggles to coordinate and make a balance with this burden to memories that are not personal, but they are entrenched in their minds to be considered alien. They are situated at a temporal as well as spatial distance from the sites of the actual trauma and this "locus of origin is the radical break" for the hinge generation, making it "a break impossible to bridge" (662). This situation of impossibility to bridge this gap or break renders these people exiled and displaced.

This reaction to the state of being cast out makes the "children of exiled survivors, although they have not lived themselves through the trauma of banishment and the destruction of home, remain always marginal or exiles, always in 'diaspora'" (662). These

ideas can be seen in certain works by Doris Lessing, who refers to the First World War that concomitantly crippled her father physically and mentally and left him traumatized. His narratives could be assessed to have made Lessing the agent of "postmemory"and an associate of the "hinge generation," which she explicates in her novels.

Young Martha, in the autobiographical novel *Martha Quest* lives in Rhodesia with her parents and her father happens to be a war veteran who has decided to settle in Africa and become a farmer after losing a leg in the war. Martha has spent her entire childhood in Africa and to her England is an unfamiliar entity that is recognizable to her only through her parents' anecdotes of the country. Martha's inability to accept either Africa or England as her "home" makes her feel displaced, and she seems to grapple with the sense of not belonging anywhere. While in Africa, she has grown up listening to her parents' talk every year about going back home, which is England when the crops are good or when they have built a fortune; however, it never seems to materialise. It is good to give relevant texts from the book.

Martha's mother wants to raise her according to proper English standards of behaviour and etiquette and she constantly rectifies Martha's manners and shows her how a girl in England would behave in a similar situation. This creates in her a dualism, a feeling of constant friction about the idea of "home", which to her also signifies England. In the novel *The Four-Gated City*, when Martha ultimately reaches England, contrary to expectations she is neither jubilated nor euphoric on homecoming. Martha's state is reduced to that of the diaspora populace that belongs neither to the colonized community nor the colonizer's group.

The effect of the World War on Martha's father is clearly visible in most of the Martha novels[2]. In *Martha Quest*, Martha recalls how she and her mother would not allow him to recede into the past:

> They [Mrs. Quest and Martha] would not leave him in peace to think about the war, in which he had lost his health, and perhaps something more important than health; they would not leave him to dream tranquilly about the future, when some miracle would transport them all into town, or England; that nagged at him, as he said himself, like a couple of darned fishwives. (*Martha Quest* 47)

Martha has been made an agent of "postmemory," making her an uninvolved and indirect participant in the trauma of the war she has never witnessed or been a part of. Mr. Quest is engaged in ruminating about England of his times and the war that affected his family and friends. Mr. Quest's reference to an age that is only a part of Martha's imagination angers her as she gets older. Mr. Quest forms the strange habit of repeating events from the war or the place that has influenced his life and his repeated recalling of the events of the war act as a potential tool that traumatises Martha.

Trauma and Postmemory are twin processes that leave indelible marks in an individual through memory, repetition and repression. Hirsch refers to the function of "traumatic repetition" in the construction of postmemory discourse (*Family* 24). Mr. Quest is

perpetually absorbed in talking about the war and his physical disability. To remember and forget at intervals and narrate the experiences intermittently are traumatic to the listener who has to bear the tragic mood of the survivor and unwillingly participate in the loss that is narrated. Mr. Quest's accounts of the war are traumatic to Martha who listens to the father's agonising experiences repeatedly. She can neither stop her father nor break his conversation.

Mr. Quest takes particular delight in talking at length about the war and his illness that "it was as if a twin channel drove across his brain and if his thought switched from one subject, they must enter the other, like a double track leading to the same destination" (*Martha* 56). Mr. Quest so involved in his personal loss that he is particularly pleased with Douglas Knowell, his daughter's suitor who lends a sympathetic ear to the tales of the dreaded trenches in the war, while their neighbour Mr. Van Rensberg is unwelcome because he talks about the farm. Quote and also show how Knowell and Rensberg respond. At another instance, Martha waits impatiently for her father to conclude his speech and say, "But that was the Great Unmentionable, and of course you don't want to hear about it, you're all too busy enjoying yourselves" (96). When Douglas assures him of patient listening, Mr. Quest rejects the gesture by saying that he has grown too old and his stories are better to be left for another time.

While Martha turns the representative of postmemory in *Martha Quest*, in *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing continues her narration by blending two genres, memoir and fiction. While the first part is the fictionalised account of what Emily and Alfred's lives would have been if the war had not disturbed them, the second part is a memoir of her parents' actual life, their first meeting and their life together in Africa. The first part imagines the separate lives of the two individuals who would not have met and Lessing would not have been born. She elaborates the separate lives of Emily and Alfred, their vocations and the directions they have chosen independently, and how their lives seem to intersect at one point and the way they are both given the kind of lives Lessing thinks they would have desired to live.

The creation of this alternate, imagined history by postmemory as Hirsch mentions "creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall" ("Past" 664). Lessing uses her imagination and creativity to overcome what she cannot recover. Lessing's life and *Alfred and Emily* are dominated by sequences from the First World War that is larger than her perceptions and preceded her birth. In *Alfred and Emily*, the narrator recalls: "I think my father's rage at the trenches took me over, when I was very young, and has never left me. Do children feel their parents' emotion? Yes, we do, and it is a legacy I could have done without…. It is as if the old war is in my own memory, my own consciousness" (36). Lessing understands that she cannot occupy the "constructed village" ("Past" 666) and her novels are sites of postmemory that are simultaneously acts of "public mourning" (665) over the loss of life that could have been re-created.

Postmemory's connection to the past is not through recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation that strangles personal stories and experiences.Hirsch mentions:

> …postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and created … memory is more connected to the past [versus postmemory]. (*Family* 22).

By "imaginative investment," Hirsh means the ways in which imaginative reconstructions of the second-generation gain access to a particular history that they have never been a part but the incidents have affected their consciousness. The events happened in the past but their consequences are felt in the present. In *Alfred and Emily*, the photographs of Lessing's parents, her own childhood pictures and the places she had spent in childhood are used. The photographs are placed in the second section of the book after "Alfred and Emily: A Novella" ends and in the beginning section of "Alfred and Emily: Two Lives" and they serve as the mnemonic devices that connect memory and postmemory. The familial photographs reduce distance, bridge severance and foster identification and relationships.

The two novels discussed become the media through which Lessing has revealed importance of the intensity of emotions that are involved in stories of loss, suffering and pain that have affected several families and extended the same to the world that can feel the trauma. Her desire is to release her parents from the deprivations of war and guarantee them freedom from bondage. Her books serve to give her parents solace from an unkind world and left the author to overpower force and retribution. The line "My father bleeds history" by Art Spiegelman, the subtitle to *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale*[3]speaks of a child's desire to repair the loss of family, home, belonging and safety in an unpredictable world. Such desires "bleed" from one generation to the other in the effort to repair the irrevocable loss created by war and similar disasters. The effort is to mitigate the effects of long histories of massive trauma and save the future generations from the impact of continuous apprehension.

Endnotes

1. Marianne Hirsch introduces the term "postmemory" in an article on Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1992 in the journal *Discourse.* She develops her theory in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*written in1997.
2. Martha Quest is the fictionalprotagonist of the five semi-autobiographical novels by Doris Lessing. Known as the **Children of Violence Series**, the novels that trace Martha's progress from childhood to adulthood are *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954), *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), *Landlocked* (1965), and *The Four-Gated City* (1969).

3. *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale* is a Pulitzer-prize winning a graphic book on the Holocaust by the American cartoonist Art Spiegelman, serialized from 1980 to 1991 and *My Father Bleeds History* is the sub-title to the book published in 1986. The book depicts Spiegelman interviewing his father Vladek about his experiences as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor.

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