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### **“A LONG INTERIOR JOURNEY” OF KATE BROWN AS BORDER CROSSING: GENDER, AGE, AND CLASS IN DORIS LESSING’S *THE SUMMER BEFORE THE DARK***

*The essay collection “Doris Lessing: Border Crossings” (2009), claims the writer’s persistent impulse to cross borders of all kinds – gender, maternity, class, ideology, geography, etc., and explores the impact it has on Lessing’s novels and autobiography. It therefore offers a new critical and theoretical approach that revises a traditional methodological paradigm of Lessing studies. This article extends the field of exploration by examining the transgressions of borders in the author’s novel of 1973 “The Summer Before the Dark”. Despite the extensive scholarship on the writer over the last years this novel remains among those which are less explored. However, it is relevant to the new theoretical scheme suggested by the authors of the volume. A central protagonist, Kate Brown, breaks restrictive gender and age codes as she is moving into “the darkness” of her new life order. The controversy of this move is announced in the title of the novel but towards its end the text suggests a transformation that enables the heroine to revise her agency inside and outside the domestic space, at the same time, through a set of narrative techniques and imagery, it problematises such a change.*

*KEY WORDS: Doris Lessing, border crossing, identity, gender, age.*

## **Introduction**

The psychologically dense narrative of *The Summer Before the Dark* presents Doris Lessing’s continuing themes of gender, maternity, and generation in its connection to aging (other works, which have been praised for their interest in age, are *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1983), *love, again* (1996)). Feminist readings situate *The Summer Before the Dark* in regard to various theoretical approaches that emphasise on socio-cultural determinants of gender, class, and age and how they form the protagonist’s Self. The novel is commonly defined as a novel of awakening. The protagonist, Kate Brown, is awakening “from the cultural illusion of the “beauty myth” and ageism that her culture fabricates” (Aghazadeh 2016: 25). As a new self of the heroine emerges while she is “learning how to grow old”, it is also identified as a *Reifungsroman*, a novel of ripening (Waxman 1985: 5). Betsy Draine

interprets it as an "apologue", i.e. "a simple narrative vehicle for conveying an idea" (cited in Greene 1997: 123). But neither of these readings considers border crossing as a creative process that ultimately promises a new life scenario for the main protagonist nor touches upon the relevance of this change to the author's own philosophy of life voiced in her seminal essay *The Small Personal Voice* (1957) and numerous interviews.

The article examines the transgressions of borders, undertaken by Kate Brown, from the perspective of the concept of border crossing, suggested by the authors of the collection *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings* (2009), as well as using the relevant ideas of cultural anthropology (Thomas D. Hall). The article also gives an answer to the question in what way this critical approach rereads the end of the story which till now remains one of the focuses – and the sticking point – in the scholarship of *The Summer Before the Dark*. The epitext of the novel helps to identify the relationship between the author and its novel, the impact of D. Lessing's personality on the key protagonist.

### **Doris Lessing: living on the borders**

The authors of the collection *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings* take border crossing as a starting point in their studies of Doris Lessing's fiction. The intention to explore writer's transgressions of borders is grounded, first of all, on the premises of varied reader response, in academia and blogosphere, that has been changing over years and intensified after Lessing's receipt of the Nobel Prize (feminist, anti-feminist, science fiction writer, realist who lost her way, Marxist, reactionary, British writer, and postcolonial one). And the second fundamental factor is the writer's personality, D. Lessing's "persistent impulse to cross borders of all kinds" in her life (Ridout, Watkins 2009: 2). In the opening pages of the *Introduction*, Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins (also the editors) refer to the description of Lessing, given by Motoko Rich and Sarah Lyall (2007), as a "Persian-born, Rhodesian-raised and London-residing novelist". The anaphoric use of hyphenated words in the definition emphasises Lessing's position "between". In the view of S. Ridout and A. Watkins (2009:2), it not only "points out to the difficulty of categorizing Lessing" but also prompts to "embrace these contradictory aspects of [her] writing". Organised in chronological order nine essays in the main part of the volume present quite a wide range of the author's work (excluding *The Summer Before the Dark*) along the varied contexts in which it signifies. The book not only suggests these various contexts but also maps the borders Doris Lessing was crossing literally and intellectually.

Mapping the shifts across the borders, the scholars deal with the writer's continuing themes, this time giving more value to Lessing's own voice – and the recognition of the authorial authority (and it is the factor which in different ways is considered throughout the volume) is one of the major changes in the strategy of the Lessing studies presented in the book.

One more factor that could buttress this approach is D. Lessing's authorial scepticism (Miroshnychenko 2014: 308). Therefore, very inspiring is the statement expressed in the final sentence of the *Introduction* that acknowledges the writer's sceptical mind: "contradiction

is not one of the novel's (and Lessing's) failings, but a strategic attempt to embody, in a creative process of border crossing, the dynamic relation between supposedly opposing ideas" (Ridout, Watkins 2009: 12).

### **Kate Brown as Mrs Michael Brown**

Two of the central questions the novel explores are how the woman deals with the family structure as they both change with time, and in what way familial interacts with personal. The novel's answers are in general in accord with D. Lessing's basic idea of a woman that her reader is well aware of since *The Golden Notebook* (1962) but this time special focus is put on the correlation between the collective and the individual. It is precisely with this antinomy that the novel begins. The narration starts *in medias res* with the voice of the central protagonist, Kate Brown, mediated by the author.

She was trying to catch hold of something, or to lay it bare so that she could look and define; for some time she had been 'trying on' ideas like so many dresses off a rack. She was letting words and phrases as worn as nursery rhymes slide around her tongue: for towards the crucial experiences custom allots certain attitudes, and they are pretty stereotyped. <...> Of course, the choice of one rather than another of these time-honoured phrases has seldom to do with a personal feeling... (Lessing 2002: 5)

As seen from the fragment, in Kate's mind, a personal feeling is endangered by "stereotyped attitudes" towards "crucial experiences" and by inaccuracy of the language in presenting it. A few paragraphs after the protagonist acknowledges the problem: "the truth was, she was becoming more and more uncomfortably conscious not only that the things she said, and a good many of the things she thought, had been taken down off a rack and put on, but that what she really felt was something else again" (Lessing 2002: 6). This discrepancy between the internal experience and its "external" rationalisation creates discomfort, makes Kate aware of the restraints of mind and the limits of language: "she was something, she was feeling something pretty strongly that she couldn't put her finger on..." (Lessing 2002: 9) The linguistic incompetence the protagonist complains about is allusive of *The Golden Notebook* by Anna Wulf, who, reflecting on the fundamental issue of representation and "reality", creates a bright visual trope for that – "the thinning of language against the density of our experience" (Lessing 2007: 273). But this gesture of self-awareness of the restricted linguistic accuracy does not stop both diegetic women from trying. Kate Brown, though not a writer as Anna Wulf, is further and till the end of the novel fully absorbed with the mechanics of what she labels as "her internal journey". Also, critical comment on the inadequacy of language in the novel's opening page may be treated as anticipatory of the story's end, the protagonist's reluctance to describe the transformative effects of the journey she has completed.

Kate is careful about generalising her personal feelings, complains about lack of self-knowledge. The latter is explained a few lines afterwards when the reader is informed about the protagonist's name: "this woman was Kate Brown: to be accurate Catherine Brown, or Mrs Michael Brown" (Lessing 2002: 9). The irony in regard to the woman's matrimonial

status (over)determining her identity and to extent of self-ignorance belongs to the author, but when the focaliser is again with Kate, the narration catches up with her reflection on private experience along the temporal dimension.

Regretting now the experience that she escaped, does Kate put blame for that on her husband? This question is first implied in the text and in the next lines it comes on the surface, transforming itself into another "Have I ever chosen?" In the sentence that follows the interrogation is put in a broader context referring to a woman in general (the correlation of the individual and the collective is preserved), "a woman, as she might have done any time during the past several hundred years, stood under the tree, holding a crowded tray" (Lessing 2002: 10). Kate, just as any woman for the last hundred years, is suddenly conscious of the restricted area of her choice, admitting that "her appearance was choice, all exquisite tact, for it was appropriate for this middle-class suburb and her position in it as her husband's wife. And, of course, as the mother of her children." (Lessing 2002: 11)

As seen from the quote, Kate's choice is limited to her obligations as a housekeeper, her husband's wife and mother, above all in the meanings signified by middle-class ideology. The woman's appearance too is in accord with the expectations of her husband. And her four children see Kate as "a pretty, healthy, serviceable woman" (Lessing 2002: 11). In contrast to the family's expectations, "her own choice would have been to go barefooted, to discard her stockings, and to wear something like a muu-muu – with her hair straight to her shoulders" (Lessing 2002: 11). The degree of the imposed consensus is ruinous to her nature, "she did not allow her appearance to bloom, because she has observed early in the children's adolescence how much they disliked her giving rein to her own nature" (Lessing 2002: 11). In fact, in interview to C. J. Oates (1973), commenting her authorial intentions in *The Summer Before the Dark*, Doris Lessing acknowledged that the phenomenon of a woman "so totally defined by her marriage" had long interested her. Her own marriages, she mentioned, were not very long (married twice, to Frank Charles Wisdom and Gottfried Lessing, she left them both to start a new life in London) and "did not permanently affect her". Unlike the protagonist of the *The Summer Before the Dark*, she knew how to deal with that.

In order to chart her own territory Kate has to circumvent the restrictions or cross the boundaries of gender and class. In the novel it is first the boundary of her house that she crosses. When Kate Brown is offered a job for Global Food, she's already prepared to quickly reconsider her summer mission, earlier defined and policed as "a base for the members of the family" (Lessing 2002: 13). This sudden alternative of mundane routine emancipates her hidden thoughts enabling her to commence what she later labels as "internal journey" – a process of reconsideration of the roles she has been performing since her marriage, – socially fabricated roles, imposed on her, and, what's more, the roles that formed her Self. Remarkably, this process is from now on tightly connected with constant retrospective looks as far as her childhood, which, as she becomes more aware, is the time before she began appropriating these roles. Numerous gestures of revisiting past, a growing self-awareness about the lost possibilities of her early years and adolescence not only make Kate excessively

emotional but also identify her domesticity pattern as intellectually claustrophobic thus making her move over the threshold of the house (of the familial) inevitable.

### **Beyond the home space**

If in the first part the novel focuses on the details of Kate Brown's life as a housewife, carer and mother, in parts that follow she is exposed to different contexts beyond the border of her house. Performing a job for Global Food, Kate travels to various places, spends a month in London, eventually comes back home to her family with a new idea of her life after forty five.

The structural elements of the novel attest to the importance of spatial dimension as it is divided into five chapters, three of them referring to spatial loci: "At Home," "The Hotel," and "Maureen's Flat". Changing spaces marks each time a new stage in the protagonist's "internal journey" that not only excessively reimburses a dramatic lack of experience (something she complains about at the beginning: "nothing had 'happened' to her for a long time" (Lessing 2002: 9)) but also, as a result of it, has enormous transformative consequences. As the real "events" of the summer are internal, according to Gayle Greene (1997: 125), the novel is a continuation of the process articulated in the author's *The Four-Gated City* (1969), in which "the revolution had gone inwards".

The protagonist's journey begins with appreciation that "it was not Mrs Michael Brown who was being employed by Global Food" (Lessing 2002: 29), this has external manifestations – she buys new clothes, has her haircut changed, etc. With a new job Kate finds herself in a global space, marked with drama of this scale – wars, strikes, floods, and earthquakes. She makes correlation between her own condition and the global one (the dichotomy of the collective and the individual is preserved), finds the best proper word for both – and that is farcical. Her "twilight condition", "the dark" that is ahead of her, is also the world's as it "would soon worsen and darken everywhere" (Lessing 2002: 78). However, the issues of global concern do not matter to the protagonist as they do to Doris Lessing. Kate manifests empathy for the poor but at the same time she is not comfortable with this feeling. Next time she makes a cynical remark about "verbal game of middle-class" regarding "who is closer to poor people sufferings" (Lessing 2002: 78). Her rhetoric is class affected. No wonder that when approached by Maureen's friend, Philip, from a working class and a member of "the Young Front", with a political far right agenda to protect the poor layers of society (this concern becomes a central theme in Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*, 1986), Kate makes it clear that she would rather speak for her class. Parallel to that is Kate's guess about Jeffrey, who, now a hippie, is most likely to take a position in his uncle's law firm when back to Washington.

More than discussing the global agenda the heroine is prepared for a little *affaire d'amour* with Jeffrey, a young man of "between twenty and twenty-five" whom she meets towards the end of the conference. They both decide to go South.

## Spanish holidays: border crossing along maternity and age

When Kate and Jeffrey set off to Spain it is Kate who chooses the destination, and what to wear (and it is not a decent, *comme il faut* outfit but a frivolous "shocking-pink" dress). In these manifestations of one's own free will that ruins gender and class stereotypes the protagonist establishes a new agency reconquering the once lost territory.

Crossing the border of gender coincides with crossing the border of age. To send a couple to Spain means to test the protagonist's decision against moral principles because the Spanish point of view in the novel is distinctly marked as moral. Local experts in the social condition categorise the couple of Kate and Jeffrey as "older woman-younger man" which demands "the utmost in tolerance from this country" (Lessing 2002: 75). The standards are strict, but while locals condemn such relations, Kate, who is repudiating the convention, does not feel remorse.

The affair of "non-loving lovers" is far from being "desperate and romantic" and does not bring the expected satisfaction to Kate as her partner falls ill. The novel in general pays little attention to sex and erotic love. On the first day when Jeffrey goes to bed, she, instead of having sex with him, and being alone once again indulges herself in memories – this time in regard to her maternity. In the novel maternity is problematised by the consequences it has on the protagonist's personal identity, in building her character. Looking back she summarises a list of virtues she acquired while bringing up a family of four. Among those she mentions are self-control, self-abnegation, and adaptability to others. But beyond the border of the house they no longer look like virtues to her, furthermore, she calls them "enemies" – as growing to "a sponge for small wants year after year" (Lessing 2002: 91) ruined her.

With Jeffrey she intentionally rejects to be maternal in order to be a woman in love, to approach him erotically. Because she suppresses the maternal impulse she does not suggest a doctor to be sent for. Instead they travel around central Spain until the man gets much worse – semi-conscious he is taken to the convent, in hope to seek medical help. In Kate's observation, vitality, expected of the young, ironically is the virtue she possesses. Crossing the border of age is not traumatic for Kate unless young women are around. In fact, the scenes of very poor provincial life, of women of her age looking old and exhausted, make her feel bitter but at the same time they assure her that changing age stages in her situation is not bad. According to Sima Aghazadeh (2016: 21), who explored the problem of ageism in the novel, it "offers a positive paradigm for aging".

As Kate navigates her both journeys (external and internal), emotional and rational intertwine resulting in an ambiguity – in "constant swings" between need for love and irritation at this need, "the desire to have more freedom" and "the coward's need of being confined" (Lessing 2002: 121). It is exactly parallel to the theory of borders that claims that "the unknown quality of the "other side of the border or frontier" simultaneously generates curiosity, promise, threat, and fear" (Hall 2005). This combination of reactions aroused by approaching the unknown territory is observed in Kate as well. Moving outside the familial structure that she and her husband had created twenty years ago is physically uncomfortable for the woman. She falls ill and leaving Jeffrey for good goes back to London, but not

home (as earlier she decided to let their home out), to a hotel in Bloomsbury. Remarkably, the more the heroine speculates on her marriage the more conscious she becomes of the correlation between gender and personal identity, and the more she sees marriage as “a betrayal of what she really was” (Lessing 2002: 123). The latter provokes more nostalgia about the past, time of completeness. However, while she puts blame on her family members for that she is also aware of her own part.

### **In the hotel: not caring but being cared of**

Apart from the obvious connotations of “non-place” (to use M. Augé’s term), suggested by the contrast between “the realities of transit... with those of residence and dwelling” (Augé 1997: 107), the hotel is the space where Kate is in the position of being cared of as opposed to caring about others. And this is just another transgression of the familial border that Kate Brown makes in this part of the journey. Noticeably, the shift is anticipated earlier in the text – through animalistic imagery used by the protagonist herself to define her role. She calls herself a stray cat, a wounded bird or an animal that is “teased by cruel children”. She is therefore profoundly pleased with the emotions of care she receives from the strangers at the hotel – gentle Anya from Austria and Silvia from Italy. But her physical infirmity gets worse, and she is gradually deprived of vitality to a degree when Mary Finchley, her old friend, whom she meets by accident in one of her strolls, takes her for a tramp.

The episode with Mary brings back Kate’s memory of their perennial relationship. Although during the journey Kate often refers to this woman, it is in this chapter that the reader comes to understanding why. She, in particular, admits that Mary, unlike herself, is a sort of woman who is easy going, sexy, and is not overburdened with conventions. Kate befriends somebody who is her double, thus representing the potential she once rejected. Mary is a double, typical for contemporary women’s fiction (Jocasta in M. Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*, Joan in S. Plath’s *Bell Jar*), but as Gayle Greene (1997: 136) claims, unlike “most doubles who remain “other” and protect the protagonist from the taint of the unconventional, Mary represents qualities Kate will incorporate: she changes her”. In the context of Kate’s border crossing, Mary Finchley can also be defined as a catalyser of the process, and not only due to her “socially deconditioned state” but also thanks to the intimacy and trust that they had built up together.

### **At Maureen’s flat: outside the cocoon... and back to it?**

Maureen is the novel’s third female character and its centrality in the chapter is suggested in the title, “Maureen’s Flat”. Her flat is a space with distinctive markers of a young liberated woman of the 1970s, allusive of Anna Wulf’s subverted domesticity. Also, unlike the hotel in Bloomsbury, it promises more intimate relations and eventually a bond between the two women – the bond that becomes critical for both. Kate completes her “long interior journey” and Maureen approaches her vital life decision.

At this stage of Kate’s self-quest the spatial dimension directly correlates with her new Self, as is represented in the heroine’s own observations.

<...> 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 here no one expected anything, knew anything about her supports, her cocoon. (Lessing 2002: 165)

Kate is comfortable in her new state, in which she is emancipated from settled roles, from expectations of other people – epitomised in the image of cocoon. This territory – beyond the "cocoon of comfort and protection", "support" and "recognition" – makes the protagonist's metamorphoses successfully complete.

The self-acknowledged opposition of the new state (new identity) and "the normal Kate of the past" (that of Mrs Michael Brown) is also manifested in the heroine's gained knowledge about what she has lost with age – and that is courage in doing what she felt like doing. She not only demonstrates her awareness of the gender roles that were assigned to her in the domestic and public sphere, but also her readiness to revise them.

In the final chapter the protagonist's self-observation is most intense whereas thanks to her vis-à-vis the heroine intentionally verbalises it. It is in the conversations with Maureen that Kate interprets what happened with her during "a long interior journey" of the summer months. The apprehension of the change goes beyond the feminine. Encompassing individual and collective, till now opposed, Kate ultimately works out her own strategy, "[w]hat she was thinking herself" (Lessing 2002: 232). It is not negation or despair in the setting of overall's bankruptcy of big ideas, grand discourses – it is the appreciation of one's individual act, of one's free will that corresponds to Lessing's concept of small personal voice.

However, the final transformation of the pivotal summer looks dimmed. Kate is on her way back to the family while Maureen is faced with the dilemma between William and Philip (but not marriage or not marriage). But just as the reader is left with no idea which of the two Maureen would eventually prefer, the journey of Kate back home is also equivocal. The readers see her going to get the bus but whether she will ultimately get home remains unanswered.

The final episode of the novel has raised critical disagreement. According to some, Kate Brown "fails", because "she has no choice but to return home and resign herself to the domestic situation which is the source of her problem" (Greene 1997: 125). Others locate her agency "in the possibility of resistance, and in the "reproduction" of a new Mrs Brown who says repeatedly "no" to the old discourses" (Aghazadeh 2016: 25). "She returns a more independent, self-possessed person than when she left, but she has not resolved her uncertainties about marriage and family...", thus the ending expresses "the hope for arrival, for the completion of the quest, not completion itself" (Stout 1990: 16–17). David J. Single (2010) emphasises the historical context of the 1970s and the protagonist's "burgeoning social subversion in a time and a place where simply to question was itself unconventional".

Indeed, in the novel Doris Lessing evokes the historical context of the 1970s, so much so that it has its part in defining the meanings. The ongoing critical debate regarding the ending of the story is similar to the discussion about Lessing's another novel, *The Golden Notebook*, they both undervalue the historical component. While feminist critics, since

the publication of the author's most famous book in 1962, claim *The Golden Notebook* to be a feminist bible, the writer herself saw it "as a historical document" (Byrne 2001). Extending the author's approach on *The Summer Before the Dark* will result in defining the novel (also) as a historical document about the lives of women in the 1970s Great Britain.

The concept of border is even more effective in decoding the meanings of the final part. Anthropologist Thomas D. Hall (2005) claims that "almost any border or boundary zone, when viewed from a sufficient distance, appears as a sharp line", but when viewed close "it becomes a zone often having blurry edges". Therefore, "from a central capital a border... may seem precise" while from the perspectives of those near or inside it, it "can be quite vague". Likewise for Kate, who is in the process of crossing the border, the final quality of transformation looks dimmed. The strategy Lessing uses to avoid statements is a vivid trope, darkness. But is it the darkness suggested in the title? The connotation becomes explicit not long before the final episode, when Kate sees "the sun in front of her, not behind... a large, light, brilliant, buoyant, tumultuous sun that seemed to sing" (Lessing 2002: 267).

The final episode of *The Summer Before the Dark* is thus more formal. Moreover, there is correlation between the beginning and the end of the novel. While critics have acknowledged it, missing is a concern with language (one of the leitmotifs of *The Summer Before the Dark*). If on the opening pages the protagonist emphasises the constraints of the language, does the reader expect a (verbal) resolution from someone like that? Unlikely, so Kate Brown makes a statement – with her hair; she has it cut off. This performative gesture of the protagonist at the end is opposed to her well-done haircut (as considered proper) at the beginning of the story, and this act of self-assertion is an indication of completing the process of border crossing along gender and age – the new Self is constructed, and the new Kate is finally happy. She (Mrs Kate Brown!) comes out of this journey prepared to further challenging stereotypes in regard to gender issues without questioning her basic life accomplishments. She returns to the domestic space (but not to the cocoon) prepared for the new reconsidered roles, to exercise her agency not only as a mother and wife. However, her attempts to circumvent the restrictions of ideology and class are less visible; she does not transcend over ideological determinants of a white middle-class woman but towards the end they less affect her self-definition.

## Conclusion

To conclude, in *The Summer Before the Dark*, Doris Lessing is concerned with the protagonist's border crossing along gender, age, and, to a lesser degree, class. The analysis of the novel proves that transgressing borders becomes for Kate Brown the source of change and the strategy of building a new Self, while she undertakes her journey.

The interpretation frame rereads the novel, proving the very possibility of the heroine's final transformation. From the perspective of border crossing, her accomplishment in learning results in the new agency. The psychological dimension of crossing borders is buttressed with a growing awareness of the historical context of the 1970s, and the ways it determined the condition of women.

The concept of border crossing, suggested by the authors of the volume, *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*, is also efficient in exposing the correlations between the author and its novel. Janis P. Stout (1990: 7) claims that "Kate's journey begins and ends in uncertainty". We may also assume that the protagonist's uncertainty correlates with the idea of the writer's sceptical mind that is explicit in her fiction and non-fiction. As D. Lessing (1994: 9) wrote earlier in *The Small Personal Voice*, "one certainty we all accept is the condition of being uncertain and insecure. It is hard to make moral judgments, to use words like good and bad." The statement implies the idea of resistance to any categorisation which Lessing advocated as both her artistic principle and life guideline.

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