

An Autobiography of Everyone? Intentions and Definitions in Doris

Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*.

Gillian Dooley

1000 word abstract

Memoirs of a Survivor was first published in 1974, and is the second of what Lessing has described as her “unrealistic stories”.¹ The “real” setting of the novel is an unnamed English city in the near future, when for some unexplained reason civilization is crumbling. The narrator, a single middle-aged woman, is mysteriously put in charge of a young girl, Emily. The wall of her flat occasionally melts to reveal a large house. This is the “impersonal” world; however, shortly after Emily’s arrival, the narrator begins to be subjected, beyond the wall, to a child’s-eye view of an oppressive nursery where “personal” scenes from the childhood of Emily and her baby brother are played out. Meanwhile, in the “real” world, Emily passes with unnatural rapidity through the stages of adolescence, while outside cannibalism and violence become common among the gangs of young people. The narrator and Emily are besieged in the flat until the wall finally reopens and admits them to a new world.

Memoirs is subtitled, in the early editions, “an attempt at autobiography.” Lessing complains, “curiously, no one noticed it, as if that precision was embarrassing”². This is not strictly true: of a sample of ten contemporary reviews, only half do not mention the autobiographical element. Victoria Glendinning says, “it is a very devious piece of self-revelation, and it reads like a novel.”³ With the insight Lessing has now provided into her early childhood with Volume One of her (more literal) autobiography, *Under My*

Dooley, Gillian 2006. An Autobiography of Everyone? Intentions and Definitions in Doris Lessing's “Memoirs of a Survivor”. ‘Life Writing Symposium’, 13-15 June. Flinders University. [abstract].

Skin, it is obvious that Emily's childhood beyond the wall is indeed a vivid re-creation of her own early years in Persia; and the adolescent Emily in the "real" world of the novel is recognizable as the clever, polite, uncommunicative teenager who grew up to become Doris Lessing. But without this external information it is unreasonable for her to expect all her readers to focus on the autobiography in a work which has so many other elements – fantasy, dreams, prophecy, social comment, psychological study, fable. Also, it seems unfair for her to complain when people fail to notice the autobiography in this work, since she so often criticizes readers for seeing too much autobiography in her other fiction.

Nevertheless, Lessing's description of this novel as autobiography is one that it would be unreasonable for critics to ignore, however much one is determined to discount intention, since it appeared originally as the subtitle of the novel. She expanded quite considerably on this point in a 1985 interview:

In *Memoirs of a Survivor*, what the narrator believes that she is seeing behind the wall, that apparent dream world, actually represents her own life, her own childhood. In the tangible world, Emily whom she sees growing up represents the image of her adolescence. Thus, reality and dream, marked off by the wall, complement each other to give an all-encompassing vision to the narrator's past.⁴

The "dreams" in *Memoirs* are apparently her own life, part of the "attempt at autobiography"; so the small girl who experiences the "prison" of the "personal" scenes is both the narrator and Emily, this oppressive childhood being meant somehow to represent a universal experience.

One of Lessing's more stable beliefs is in the universality of personal experience. She uses it to justify writing about "petty personal problems" because "nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one's own ... growing up is after all only the understanding that one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares"⁵. Emily, the narrator, and Emily's mother are all merged into one continuous being. And the character Emily, at times at least, is everywoman, a victim of "the emotional hurts which are common, are the human condition, part of everyone's infancy"⁶. But to take the child Emily as the universal child, representative of "the human condition," ignores the other child behind the wall, the adored little brother. What happens to the cosseted and indulged child, while the ignored one grows up too fast?

A conflict arises between Lessing's insistence on the truth of this portrait of an individual with a specific history, and the claim that she represents everyone. The belief that all experiences are universal, which Lessing has used to justify writing about the personal, sits awkwardly with a statement she makes in her 1985 book *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*: "Everything that has ever happened to me has taught me to value the individual, the person who cultivates and preserves her or his own way of thinking, who stands out against group thinking, group pressures"⁷. *Memoirs of a Survivor* gives little clue as to how this individual is formed, "the individual, in the long run, who will set the tone, provide the real development in a society"⁸, unless it is by being the excluded one, the unloved, the exile in one's family and society. By implication, these are the people who have the critical eye needed to view their society with detachment and who can "stand out against group thinking," while the secure, integrated people who have been happy in childhood fit easily into society and

Dooley, Gillian 2006. An Autobiography of Everyone? Intentions and Definitions in Doris Lessing's "Memoirs of a Survivor". 'Life Writing Symposium', 13-15 June. Flinders University. [abstract].

unthinkingly conform to its rules. These are the people who would seem to be described by another of the narrator's absolute statements: "How else do things work always unless by imitation bred of the passion to be like?" (51). But many of her characters – most of the protagonists of her novels – have been formed by the opposite of admiration; by a reaction against emulation of others, a resistance to conformity. Somehow, there must be a way of accommodating these conflicting beliefs in individuality and universality. Lessing obviously feels that she is a unique person, but it is an intellectual discipline for her to insist that other people have the same experiences and feelings, and therefore, of course, the same rights. It is in this sense a political belief. But it excludes the possibility, which is of vital interest to most novelists, that other people might be profoundly different to oneself, and that recognizing that difference and allowing for it can also be a worthwhile intellectual discipline. This belief in universal experience, while allowing her to see the tyranny of the *zeitgeist* over her own life and those of others, places a damaging restriction on her perceptions which carries over into her novels, where her characters are too often blurred and dulled into similarity.

But Lessing's "provocative ideas," which she might call "a series of queries – to myself, to other people"⁹ are, as she keeps warning us, not dogma. Unresolved dilemmas like the individual versus the universal might cloud the water, but the search for a solution is what has kept Lessing writing well into her eighties.

¹ Tan Gim Ean et al, "The Older I Get, the Less I Believe," [1991] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 201.

² Francois-Olivier Rousseau, "The Habit of Observing," [1985] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 148.

³ Victoria Glendinning, "The Return of She," *Times Literary Supplement* 13 December 1974: 1405.

⁴ Rousseau 147-8.

⁵ Doris Lessing, Preface, *The Golden Notebook* (London: Flamingo, 1993) 13.

⁶ Lessing, *Under 25*.

⁷ Doris Lessing, *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* (London: Flamingo, 1994) 83.

⁸ Lessing, *Prisons* 82.

⁹ Minda Bikman, "A Talk with Doris Lessing," [1980] *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 61.