

**THE FEMALE SELF AS A NARRATIVE SOURCE
IN DORIS LESSING'S THE SUMMER BEFORE THE DARK
AND LOVE, AGAIN**

(‘Life is stronger than fiction.’- Doris Lessing)

Andreea Catrinela LAZĂR¹

Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the female self as a narrative source in connection with wider constructions of femaleness with particular reference to the lifestyle women have chosen, the socialization they have experienced and interpersonal relationships they may establish through their lives. Starting with Paul Ricoeur's ideas that narrative relates with time and self is a form of "being aware of existence", I will give examples of how female self expressed at various levels is mirrored in Doris Lessing's The Summer Before The Dark and Love, Again.

Keywords: (female) self, dimensions of self, narrative time

Introduction

In her interviews with various journalists, Doris Lessing often talks about her writing muse and admits that "Life is stronger than fiction" (Ingersoll, 1994: 13). When she confesses that "I don't understand people being bored. I find life so enormously exciting all the time. I enjoy everything enormously if only because life is so short" (Ingersoll, 1994: 12), we easily realize that for the British female writer, life itself is an excitement, an impetus that justifies the consistent feature of her writings: the individual's quest for self-identity.

The novels chosen for exemplification, *The Summer before the Dark and Love, Again* raise more questions in different fields (mostly feminism, sociology and psychoanalysis), and, obviously, there are different ways of interpreting Lessing's fiction. Therefore, in this paper, it is our intention to approach the female characters and analyze the way their self is expressed at various levels, focusing on the core idea that the self is produced in the narrative, and it is in daily routines that the textual identity gets a better shape.

¹ Andreea Catrinela, Lazăr, "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University, engfraro@yahoo.com

Life narratives

1. Time as a source of self

The narratives of these two novels distinguish themselves through a significant breaking of the chronometric time meant to show the diversity of time experience, the many notions of desire and of memory, different conceptions of the past and speculations of the future. In this context, we think it is interesting to follow the theorist Paul Ricoeur and the analysis of the relationship between narrative and the experience of time in his three volume study *Time and Narrative*. The analysis itself makes visible the disjunctive strategies of contemporary fiction, highlighting the theoretician's core idea. Accordingly, the crucial role of narrative in our everyday social and personal lives is meant to enhance the coherence of our temporal impressions. Thus,

Time becomes human to the extent that is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence. (Ricoeur, 1990: 52)

In his remarkable book *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor moves forward the interest in this subject by arguing that in configuring the picture of self-identity, people become able to answer the questions of existence. Identity crisis thus expresses the feeling of disorientation and uncertainty (often under the veil of anxiety) about the meaning of life. Doris Lessing herself capitalizes on the tremendous influence of life experiences and states that "Literature is the analysis after the event" (Lessing, 2007: 210). Through experiences, individuals acquire meaning about their own being as well as the world around them. It is life itself that makes people realize who they really are.

Questioning the "truth" of absolute time, time experience came to be considered as "objective" in the sense that it was a function shared by all human consciousness. It is exactly what Kant stated in 1781 when he defined time as "a merely subjective condition" of the human intuition, being nothing in itself, independently of the mind or the subject (Kant, 1968: 54). Also for Edmund Husserl, time is far from being absolute, becoming meaningful only in the formation of the self. At the same time, for Husserl, the self only has meaning as a creation in time (Husserl quoted in Morrison, 2003: 27). Consequently, to understand how narrative matches with the concept of self and how self-narrative is maintained in life, we think it is interesting to analyse the three dimensions of self – the temporal, the moral and the social, as suggested by Anthony Kerby, Charles Taylor and Anthony Giddens.

Therefore, in *The Summer before the Dark*, Kate Brown, the main character of the novel, is a full time wife who falls victim to despair after realizing that her real 'self' has been in a cold storage during her marriage. Unlike her, in *Love, Again*,

Sarah Durham, a sixty-year-old theatrical producer, seems to be a remarkable powerful woman whose self-esteem and self awareness are deeply questioned. Similar ambiguities turn the two protagonists into 'defenders of soul' – a way to get recovered from a sort of breakdown or tormenting experiences, in both cases generated either by failed relationship or marriage.

Doris Lessing constructs Sarah Durham (*Love, Again*) with the intention of tackling on what happens to middle-aged or older women, like Sarah. It is very interesting to notice what happens when they fall in love or lust with people much younger than themselves and how they cope with passion and pain when parts of their life overwhelm all the others. By creating such an interesting character, Lessing questions her readers on how condemned or blessed they feel when falling in love again and again:

To fall in love is to remember one is an exile, and that is why the sufferer does not want to be cured, even while crying, I can't endure this non-life, I can't endure this desert. Another thought, perhaps of a more practical kind: When Cupid aims arrows (not flowers or kisses) at the elderly and old, and brings them to grief, is this one way of hustling people who are in danger of living too long off the stage, to make way for the new? (Lessing, 2007: 338)

With Kate Brown, we experience the same identity crisis, but in other parameters. Our protagonist is completely dedicated to her family and faithful to her husband in spite of his numerous love affairs. The novel opens on her image: she stands in the garden of her house waiting for the kettle to boil. Certainly, it is not the only thing she is expecting: like Sarah, she is waiting for something to change her life while reflecting on her marriage:

The fact was, the picture or image of herself, as the warm centre of the family, the source of invisible emanations like a queen termite, was two or three years out of date. (Was there something wrong with her memory perhaps? It seemed more and more as if she had several sets of memory, each contradicting the others.) The truth was that she had been starved for two years, three, more – at any rate, since the children had grown up. (Lessing, 2002: 52)

If for Kate it is the new professional opportunities that prepare the 'self battlefield', Sarah's life is illuminated after reading the journals of Julie Vernon, a musician, a diarist, an artist, a free woman ahead of her time. For her – an old woman –, the change is profound: she falls in love with two younger men, one after another, causing her to relive her own stages of growing up, from immature and infantile love (the beautiful and androgynous Bill) to the mature love, Henry:

She had never been a woman much given to self examination. Well, Sarah hadn't been either, until what she now privately thought of as the calamity had overwhelmed her: but could anything be absolutely bad that had led to so much new understanding? (Lessing, 2007: 338)

2. Dimensions of self

The explanation of the disturbance of the three dimensions in Kate's and Sarah's identity crisis relies on the approach of psychoanalysis and sociology. In *Narrative and the Self*, Kerby discusses these three dimensions but focuses only on the facet of temporality. I thus draw on Taylor's arguments which dwell on the moral dimension of the self and Anthony Giddens's theory in *Modernity and Self-Identity* to examine the social aspect and the maintenance of self-identity. Despite the difference of their perspectives, all the three critics endorse the concept of self as narrative and at a closer look their points frequently echo each other. Based on their arguments, we construct the three dimensions of the self to facilitate the exploration of Kate's and Sarah's identity crises, particularly their effects.

For the postmodernists, as Magali Cornier Michael² states, the true self is an illusion which implies that the subject exists in a continuous construction and reconstruction. Within postmodern fiction, the subject is illustrated or intuited through the text's language. Characters are not any longer a template of real people, but presented as constructions. To strike a balance that embraces neither the romantic nostalgia for wholeness nor the postmodernist playfulness becomes an issue that has to be dealt with:

Characters have not disappeared from all postmodernist fiction, however, which indicates that in many instances traditional representation has been transformed rather than totally eradicated. While postmodern fiction challenges mimetic representation, it also offers a new, more overtly textual and self-reflexive form of representation that exposes its own filtered or biased quality. (Michael, 1996: 40)

As if she looked for 'a template of her real self', Kate Brown balances her role identities. She constantly discovers her futility within her family partially due to the fact that her responsibilities as a housewife have been limited after her children quitted their home. Reflecting on her marriage, it is not that she is consciously unhappy, but overwhelmed with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. She realizes that she is not any longer capable of thinking because, for twenty-five years of marriage, she has had no time for it:

Thinking? She would not have said so. She was trying to hold of something, or to lay it bare so that she could look and define; for some time now 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. (Lessing, 2007: 5)

² Cornier Magali Michael tackles the challenges to notions of the subject, of reality, of language, and of narrative in terms of "crisis in representation".

Looking back in time, Kate is depressed and lacks excitement under the endless boredom of the eventless days. Despite her blue, she is afraid of changing her life when the opportunity arises: she hesitates when a friend of her husband's offers her a job which she eventually accepts even if she feels "like a long-term prisoner who knows she is going to have to face freedom in the morning" (Lessing, 2002: 18). We remark here it is not only her marriage in which she feels trapped, but also the memories of her 'chosen self'. It is she who chose this kind of life, her job as the hub of a family.

Considering the beginning of the novel *Love, Again*, Sarah Durham is introduced to the readers as a calm and cool-headed character. Thus, she comes to stop for a minute before a mirror, a common means for interrogation of decline, not necessarily a desperate one:

She looked at a handsome apparently middle-aged woman with a trim body. Her hair was described as fair on her passport. Surely, by now, she ought to have at least the odd grey hair? She didn't often look in the mirror: she was not anxious about her looks. Why should she be? She was often thought twenty years younger than her real age. (Lessing, 2007: 6)

Only later do the readers become aware of the protagonist's quest for 'a template of real self'. Partly due to her daily professional life focusing on a successful career as a writer/ administrator for a London fringe theatre, Sarah has not been involved in any relationship with any man since her husband's death twenty years earlier. Her feelings about this are completely detached, just as the feelings about her appearance:

She examined herself in the dim mirrors, switching on all the lights. Not bad, she supposed. She looked a handsome middle age matron. A hairdresser had improved her hair-do: a small smooth head had gone well with clothes more expensive than anything she had bought for years. At the theatre, her colleagues commented her. (Lessing, 2007: 14)

Sarah, as well as her colleagues, becomes very fond of a lately rediscovered feminist, Julie Vairon (a nineteenth century Martinique quadroon), whose haunting music and coolly intelligent journals prove to be the very basis for a play that Durham writes hoping to produce and perform it later on. As rehearsals start advancing and mobilizing people, the company falls under Julie's erotic spell. Thus, Stephen Ellington Smith, a wealthy patron of the arts, confesses he has been desperately in love with the long-dead woman. Sarah, who is described as having reached "the heights of common sense the evenly lit unproblematic uplands where there are no surprises" (Lessing, 2007: 43), allows herself to become obsessed with a twenty-year-old narcissistic actor, playing one of Julie's lovers. Being exposed to such experiences after a long period of time fully dedicated to singleness, our protagonist starts questioning her female self in terms of life experiences.

In such a context, we find it useful to have a closer look at the modern theories which are known to have been developed in tune with Lacan's theory of the self (Lacan, 1968: 40). Accordingly, the self is constructed in language, so that it is now widely accepted that language actually constitutes and constrains our perceptions of the world, rather than passively conveying our observation. The self, which used to be held as a given and autonomous essence within, becomes a product of language, generated in the narration of our life stories.

This is also made visible in *Self as Narrative*, where Kim Worthington quotes Emile Benveniste, arguing that "it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as subject, because language alone establishes the concept of "ego" in reality, in its reality which is that of being" (Worthington, 1996: 25). Anthony Paul Kerby also shares their opinion and claims that "language is not simply a tool of device used by persons but is part of their very definition" (Kerby, 1991: 67). Subsequently, the notion that the self is a latent but fixed entity recedes. In its place emerges the metaphor of self as a text whose content requires a selection of myriad episodes from experience, and whose lineaments permit constant revisions. Acknowledging his indebtedness to Paul Ricoeur, Kerby emphasizes that narrative structures are replica of human experience:

Life is inherently of a narrative structure. To understand a life is to trace its development upon a narrative thread, a thread that unites otherwise disparate or unheeded happenings into the significance of a development, directionality, a destiny. (Kerby, 1991:40)

With Kerby, Worthington also states:

In the process of narration, discrete moments and acts are contextualized: they are enmeshed in a history. Historical narrative contextualization is crucial to human understanding. It is because we can understand or conceptualize the connection and interrelation between remembered, experienced and anticipated actions and events, and because we can situated them in space and time, that the plethora of stimuli and experiences that constitute our world (and our selves) come to have a meaning. (Worthington, 1996: 14)

We easily remark that if narration is one of the crucial modes of human conceptualization, as they have suggested, the conceptualization of the self still has to rely on the agency of narration. Consequently, the self usually emerges from narrative.

In *Narrative and the Self*, Kerby also pinpoints to the temporal dimension of human existence saying that from birth to death human existence is measured on the horizon of time and that the notion of the self, which is contingent on this temporal existence, should not pass over the relation of temporality in its construction. He sustains that explaining 'who I am now' unavoidably involves the recollection of the past "I" (Kerby, 1991: 53). Giddens follows this line of the argument and further explains that "a person's identity is not to be found in

behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens, 1991: 54).

However, Kerby emphasizes that meaning is produced only when the larger frame of reference is available, the part-whole relation palpable. A context is needed for the present action to attain its significance. Devoid of a continual and referential context, the actions would be rendered meaningless:

It is this continuity of our life story that constitutes the greater part of our experienced self-identity.... At the broadest and most abstract level this identity is constituted out of the part-whole relation between the “now” and the at least implicit horizon of my life as a whole.... A breakdown of this type of self-identity will occur if the part-whole relation breaks down. (Kerby, 1991: 45-46)

At this point, we think that both female protagonists feel lost when they are no longer capable of identifying their referential parameters. To exemplify, we shall take Kate’s case as it is more suggestive. Finding herself out of her daily context, she comes to experience a terrible existential angst. Even if she chose deliberately to embark on a married life and gave up her university studies for Michael and their children, she finds herself bearing resentments against her husband. Due to his various “affairs” that are by definition irresponsible, Kate loses respect for her husband and starts feeling “diminished” and “assaulted” (Lessing, 2002: 64). It is the experience itself as a wife and mother that makes her change her life and accept the job offered by her husband’s friend. Kate’s exploration of the inner space and the little journey she makes from England to Turkey with Global Food, to Spain with a young lover, back to London where she shares a flat with a younger woman, and then to home stand for her trial to assign meaning to her own self:

She was being treated by these independent individuals – husband, and young people only just free from the tyrannies of adolescent emotion and therefore all the more intolerant of other people’s weakness – as something that had to be put up with. Mother was an uncertain quantity. She was like an old nurse who had given her years to the family and must now be put up with. The virtues had turned to vices, to the nagging and bullying of other people. [...] always to give out attention to detail, minuscule, wants, demands, needs, events, crises [...]. (Lessing, 2002: 93)

Thus, the conclusion we draw is that in response to the crisis, both female protagonists feel compelled to reinvestigate the pictures of their lives so as to figure out what has gone wrong. The survey of their personal histories produces a form of narrative from which the self emerges and against which they try to make sense of the present situation: Sarah’s love affairs are the more overt and obvious response to her identity crisis and, similarly, Kate’s extramarital relations as well as her job responsibilities are a means of solving her dilemma.

We notice that the **temporal dimension** assumes a very important place in the individual’s picture of his self. Kate Brown has depended on other people’s attention all her life and she has always looked for their approval to build up her

self-confidence. After long years of meeting her family's needs, she compares herself to a dog with "sympathetic eyes of a loving spaniel" (Lessing, 2002: 43). The love she emanates is a sort of receiving love back, in her turn. She realizes that her life had lacked any horizon: "she had been held upright by the invisible fluid, the notice of other people" (Lessing, 2002: 171). When the fluid drains away she becomes invisible and unable to accept it. But, suddenly, she begins to accept herself and even if the other's opinions on her are favourable, she does not care any longer: "Kate noted she did not mind about being disliked, yet only a week ago she might easily have wept" (Lessing, 2002: 190).

For Sarah, the temporal dimension of existence is also significant in terms of identity. As she travels from London to the south of France and back, *Love, Again's* heroine will move from erotic obsession to detachment. Her journey is prompted in part by an older mentor, a female figure. For Sarah Durham it is the spell of Julie Vernon, the long dead writer and musician whose romantic story – three lovers loved and lost, a child dead, a reclusive life ended by suicide – is the source for a collaborative drag Durham and others create. Long before the show is mounted, Sarah falls under Julie's erotic bewitchment:

I'm sick [Sarah] said to herself. You are sick. I'm sick with love that is all there is to it. How could such a thing has happened.... I simply can't wait to come back to my cool elderly self, all passion spent and she watched her reflection which was that of a woman in love, and not a dry old woman. (Lessing, 2007:180)

The search for a viable self-identity, just as Kerby has emphasized, inevitably involves the interplay of the past collected from the memory and the present. The picture of our personal history at best serves the basis to build on the notion of the self.

Apart from the temporal dimension, the self also moves in a moral space – **the moral dimension**. In accordance with Taylor, in defining what is moral, we announce what is of higher value. With Taylor, Kerby argues that "our identity is tied to what is morally good. To define my self is to become conversant with the values I operate by" (Kerby, 1991: 59). The portrait of self-identity consequently involves more than a recount of the personal acts with a clear and stable temporal relations; it would also drive one to explicate the basis upon which he/ she passes evaluative judgments and makes decisions.

Therefore, the quest for self identity would necessarily take the route of clarifying what is important to us and what is not. Our point here is that clarifying might lead to a certain closure. However, in Sarah's case the notion intensifies her wandering mind, resulting in a sense of disgust and staleness followed by a self recovery. Unlike her, Kate Brown suffers from a sort of transition: she cannot accept the change in her life even if she understands its necessity. She is pushed into the deep end and completely loses control of herself. She is able to follow the progress her illness makes, admitting she is seized with madness:

What was the sense of loving, hating, wanting, resenting, needing, rejecting – and sometimes all in the space of an hour – when she was here, by herself, free; it was like talking to yourself, it was insane... It was just as well she was going to be occupied. (Lessing, 2002: 36)

In talking about the identity crisis concept, Taylor (1989) perceives it as a form of uncertainty about how individual is related to his moral framework. The moral framework serves as an assessment criterion of life. As a result, the feeling of disorientation probably will give rise to the meaningless about one's life.

With respect to **the social dimension**, Kerby is convinced that almost always “our identity is not a concern for us because it is not thematically supported by the regularities in our day-to-day experience: our body, work, friends, home, and general style of living” (Kerby, 1991: 47-48). In the same context, Giddens (1991) uses the term of “practical consciousness” to define the intuition based on the routine activity and interactions. In his opinion, it stands for the most solid groundwork that supports the construct of our self-identity. Quite often, practical consciousness remains as much unconscious or non-conscious while the self-identity is unproblematic. For much of our lives a concern with self-identity may be marginal at best. Questions of identity and self-understanding arise primarily in crisis situations and at certain turning points in our routine behaviour. Such events often call for “self-appraisal” (Kerby, 1991: 6-7). However, concerning the social dimension, all three scholars assert that the maintenance of the self-identity is concrete and tangible through the participation in the social activities, the practical intercourse and engagements in the daily flux of activity.

The way in which Kate and Sarah are influenced by the social dimension of their selves is different from one protagonist to another. In *The Summer before the Dark*, Katy's identity crisis could be labelled as ‘lack of self-appraisal’, as it results from her perception that her life seems to have no direction, all her tormenting feelings being generated by the collapse of the familiar landscape of her world. As a mother, she is no longer needed because her children have decided to grow independent of her caring and protection. Trying to take pride in her independence, Kate realizes that the pride is misplaced and the posture of being emancipated is painful and ironic.

At the other pole, Sarah Durham experiences a sort of spiritual journey, more precisely a psychic one. The psychic voyage is generated by Julie Vairon's life story, which acts, as Virginia Tiger states, “as an inverse template for the conclusion, but not closure, of a contemporary story about women released from the poison that is love denied” (Tiger qtd. by Perrakis, 2007: 30). Lessing inserts parts of Julie's journals meant to be interpreted as contrasting images of Sarah's erotic raptures and negative excitement of romantic obsession. Julie's death in the river's whirlpool is recast in Sarah's descent, deeper and deeper, into a psychic whirlpool: “passing the stages of my age and youth, entering the whirlpool” (Lessing, 2007: 209). She observes that “forgotten selves... appear... like bubbles

in boiling liquid” (Lessing, 2007: 209) and concludes: “She was obviously dissolving into some kind of boiling soup, but presumably would reshape at some point” (Lessing, 2007: 212). Here, fatality is excluded as Sarah Durham is a survivor who knows that in order to prevent herself from “the dangerous animal that might attack from an unexpected place” she must never “relax vigilance” (Lessing, 2007: 342).

Conclusions: self-recovery through life narrative

The end of *Love, Again* reintroduces readers in exactly the same room with the description of which the novel opens and whose inventory accounts for the protagonist’s sensibility. This time, the character’s sensibility must have undergone change, including the exploration of hypocritical memory. Just as she has scrutinized herself before the mirror at the beginning of the novel, so does she at its ending: she scans and skims her image, now finding herself, after merely twelve months, ten years older. The reader gets more awareness in a penultimate scene, where in a London park, Sarah sits solitarily while sensitive memories of her childhood occur to her mind. It is exactly the moment when, as Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis concludes, Sarah finds “on the other side of the whirlpools of masochistic love[...] the beginnings of access to another dimension of reality” (Perrakis, 2007: 105) that make her easily discover her true self. It’s a sort of adventure that helps her understand that:

But one day you’ll know it doesn’t matter what you do and how hard you try, it is no use. And at that moment the door will slam and you will be free again. (Lessing, 2007: 335)

Unlike Sarah Durham, Kate Brown is not a natural rebel and neither does she become one. She rather gives way to the pressures society exerts on her. She becomes the attractive young woman her surroundings expected, keeping her weight down, paying significant attention to her look to meet her husband’s and children’s expectations. What she gets in return is a sort of freedom that she does not dare to use in order to develop independence. When she realizes it she drives herself to a breakdown. As hard as she might try to heal herself, she cannot change her environment or her family. She alone has become aware of her problems, but she is not strong enough to overcome the accumulated pressures awaiting her:

There are times, you know, when there’s a sort of switch in the way I looked at things – everything, my whole life since I was a girl, and I seem to myself like a raving lunatic. Love, and duty, and being in love and not being in love, and loving, and behaving well and you should and shouldn’t and you ought and oughtn’t. It’s a disease. Well, sometimes I think that’s all it is. (Lessing, 2002: 218)

If self-identity emerges from narrative, then Kate’s journeys and Sarah’s descent into a psychic whirlpool can be considered as various versions of self-narratives. Moreover, the two female protagonists stand for the postmodern subjects of a

postmodern writer, for whom the experience no matter what form it may embrace is both a response and a contribution to even conclusive evidence that reality and truth are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions and reconstructions. It is exactly the tormenting self-exploration that accounts for the importance of narrative as an expressive embodiment of our experience, as a mode of communication, and as a form of understanding the world and ultimately our self.

References and bibliography

- Giddens, A.** 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Ingersoll, G. E.** 1994. *Doris Lessing – Conversations*, Ontario: Ontario Review Press.
- Kant, I.** 1965. *Critique of Pure Reason*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Kerby, P. A.** 1991. *Narrative and the Self*, Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Lacan, J.** 1968. *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lessing, D.** 2002. *Love, Again*, London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Lessing D.** 2007. *The Summer before the Dark*, London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Michael, C. M.** 1996. *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Morrison, J.** 2003. *Contemporary Fiction*, London: Routledge Taylor Group.
- Perrakis, S. P.** 2007. *Adventures of the Spirit*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Ricoeur, P.** 1990. *Time and Narrative*, Vol. I, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, C.** 1989. *Sources of Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Worthington, K.** 1996. *Self and Community in Contemporary Fiction*, New York: Oxford University Press.

The author

Andreea Lazăr holds a B.A in English and French, an M.B.C and a PhD in Philology, University of Bucharest. She is a senior lecturer and teaches Business English at "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University.