

Inter-Generic Negotiations of Autofiction, Memory and History in Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin* (*)

supervised by

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Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to investigate the compelling conceptions of Life-Writing's generic identity developing from the intersection of the modes of Autofiction, History and Memory in British writer Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography to 1949* (1994). I claim that the text is a 'hybrid' one that interweaves three modes of writing: autofictional, historiographical and memory-oriented. I will deal with reading *Under My Skin* in light of the emerging Autofiction theory, by exploring the concept of 'autofiction,' not only as a standalone genre, but also as an emerging writing technique. With the hypothesis of Genre being fluid and dynamic, and a flexible canvas that allows its fixities to be demarcated and shifted, the expansion of focus from Autobiography to Autofiction will allow for an examination of History, Truth, Fiction, and Memory, in relation to the generic identity of the text. A careful reassessment of the status of official and 'fictionalized' accounts of the past in the text will be investigated, especially the 'personal' stories of the impact of colonization and Empire, familial crises as well as personal learning journeys on Lessing's self-referential writing. This probes the important question of how the fictional, autobiographical and autofictional reflect, directly and indirectly, aspects of Life-Writing.

Keywords: Lessing, Autobiography, Autofiction, Memory, History

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المخلص

أحاول في هذه الورقة البحثية التفكير في مفاهيم عدة كالنوع الأدبي لكتابة الحياة والتي بدورها تطورت مع تقاطع أنماط رواية الذات والتاريخ والذاكرة في نص الكاتبة الإنجليزية دوريس ليسينج *Under My Skin: Volume One of my Autobiography* (1774). أدعي أن النص يشمل ثلاثة أنماط من الكتابة: رواية الذات، والكتابة التاريخية، وتلك المفعممة بالذاكرة. سأتعامل مع النص في ضوء نظرية "رواية الذات" النقدية وهي نوعا ما حديثة النشئ، من خلال استكشاف مفهوم رواية الذات، ليس فقط كنوع أدبي مستقل، ولكن أيضا كأسلوب للكتابة. نظراً لفرضية سلاسة وديناميكية النوع الأدبي، فإن توسيع التركيز من السيرة الذاتية إلى رواية الذات سيسمح بفحص التاريخ والحقيقة والخيال والذاكرة وانعكساتهم على النوع الأدبي للنص. سيتم إعادة تقييم لوضع الروايات الرسمية و الخيالية للماضي في النص، وخاصة القصص الشخصية لتأثير الاستعمار والإمبراطورية والأزمات العائلية على مرجعية ليسينج الذاتية، فيبقى السؤال المهم حول كيفية انعكاس الخيال والسيرة الذاتية ورواية الذات بشكل مباشر وغير مباشر على كتابة الحياة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : ليسينج ، سيرة ذاتية ، رواية الذات ، الذاكرة ، التاريخ

Introduction

This paper attempts to investigate how the intersection of the modes of Autofiction, History and Memory disrupts the conformed identity of the autobiographical generic nature of Life-Writing in Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography to 1949* (1994). Lessing was born in Persia (now Iran) in 1919 to British parents. Later, her parents moved to Africa and settled in a farm in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) when she was five years old, and she remained there until moving to England in 1949. A second volume to her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade*, was published in 1997. She gained much acclaim and critical attention for her books, and she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007. Lessing's body of writing is extremely rich and diverse. She has written a wide array of novels, critical essays, autobiographies and memoirs. Many of the critics who studied her oeuvre have noted that most of her literary production is self-

referential, and draws real events and characters from her life.¹ The challenging versatility of Lessing's writing style and generic diversity have been the target of critical attention, given the fact that she was immersed in politics, being an active propagator and believer in Communism and Marxism in her early life, and concerned herself with problematics of race, gender, political ideology, and colonialism. Lessing also wrote intensively about the impact of many of the historical processes taking place, namely the two World Wars, and reflected on their influence on her life.

Under My Skin traces Lessing's life from birth in 1919 in Persia, to moving with her British colonial-settler parents to a farm in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia in West Africa when she was five. Lessing delves deep into her genealogical roots and ancestry as far back as two generations before she was born. Then she narrates her life as a white young girl growing up around a black farmer community in colonial Rhodesia, where she was in close proximity to many diverse experiences that shaped her inner subjectivity and allowed her to form a sharp consciousness to issues of race, gender, class and colonialism early on. She also includes her early adulthood years, when she married her first husband, Frank Wisdom, and had two children, only later to get divorced and remarry Gottfried Lessing. Her second marriage was also doomed to fail, and the book ends with her departure for London in 1949 along with her son, Peter, from her second marriage. Lessing's text revolved mainly around her life with her parents, whom she had a very challenging relationship with, especially her mother. She offers a lot of reflection on the effects of World War I on her parents' lives, and is always interweaving the historical processes taking place with her personal narrative. The narrator of the text is Lessing herself, later in life as an older woman, as well as the protagonist of her text. The author/narrator/protagonist intersection in the text is compelling, and will be discussed at length later in the paper, as we identify the aspects of autobiographical writing and the nature of the 'truth'/fiction dichotomy. She divides her text into chapters, focusing on certain episodes of her life

¹ See Claire Sprague's *In Pursuit of Doris Lessing* (1990) and Susan Watkins's *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings* (2009)

on the farm with her parents, at the Roman Catholic Convent high school she attended, or as an adult at home with her husband and two children. Lessing incorporates many novelistic and literary techniques in her writing, such as using meta-narration. This technique (which will be further analyzed in the paper) helps the readers access Lessing's stream of thought and get involved into the process of remembering her memories and retrieving her experience.

As mentioned above, Lessing revisits the 'past' and reassesses the direct effect of colonialism on her early life with her family by going back to her memories of childhood in Africa, up until she turns thirty.

Susan Watkins describes the nature of the text as a "fictionalized" account based on her life story, as opposed to 'official' narrations of that past (137). I claim that the text is a 'hybrid' one that interweaves three modes of writing: autofictional, historiographical and memory-oriented. The paper is divided into three sections; the first one is a theoretical review and explanation to the main key concepts tackled, namely Autobiography, Autofiction, Memory and History. The second section, Memory and History, deals with Lessing's use of Memory in constructing her personal and historical narrative. The third section deals with an important line of investigation that reads *Under My Skin* in light of the emerging Autofiction theory, by exploring the concept of

'autofiction,' not only as a rising genre, but also as an emerging writing technique that works to reconcile the concepts of 'truth' and fiction. This is based on the hypothesis that Genre is fluid and dynamic, and is a flexible canvas that allows its fixities to be demarcated and shifted, where the expansion of focus from Autobiography to Autofiction will allow for an examination of History, Truth, Fiction, and Memory, in relation to the generic identity of the text. It will be useful to examine reading the text as partly autofictional, and see whether this mode of reading substantiates referentiality and factual events, or whether it subverts Philippe Lejeune's concept of the 'Autobiographical Pact', to situate the text at the intersection of autobiography, fiction and narration; and finally to look at how Autofiction theorizing could be used to help re-categorize and reanalyze Lessing's self-referential production. Finally, the conclusion section is where I reemphasize the drawn lines of

interconnection between the discussed concepts and their manifestation in the text.

The study will ask questions on how Autofiction as a framework mediates Lessing's use of Memory in her text. Memory is an integral part of self-referential writing, both as a theme and a technique, and this research will study how she employed Individual and Collective Memory, as well as using the Acts of Remembrance to re-historicize private and public History within her Life-Narrative. This will be done by focusing on the textual aspects that explore notions of identity, memory and its relation to reflection on past 'sel(-ves), as well as critic Birgit Neumann's work on the literary representation of memory. A careful reassessment of the status of official and 'fictionalized' accounts of the past in the text will be investigated, especially the 'personal' stories of the impact of colonization and Empire, familial crises as well as personal learning journeys on her self-referential writing, probing the important question of how the fictional, autobiographical and autofictional reflect, directly and indirectly, aspects of Life-Writing.

Autobiography, Autofiction, Memory, History

Lessing's *Under My Skin* has been mostly read and critiqued as a

'classical' autobiographical text. French theorist Phillipe Lejeune defines Autobiography as "the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality" (193). Retrospection is by definition looking back on and reviewing events from one's past. When writing about one's life, the processes of retrospection and remembering take place to retrieve a past lived experience or situation, and the autobiographer then constructs it in a narrative that displays self-(re)presentation. Autobiography, as a rising mode of writing in the 18th century, took shape in a confessional form, or to recount one's life accomplishments. However, later expansion to such mode was necessary, to include other forms of life narratives such as memoirs, which Linda Anderson defines as a "more flexible and outward-looking" than Autobiography, allowing the author to focus on episodic snapshots from their lives, recounting a specific experience, rather than a linear timeline of life events. Lejeune has also introduced the 'Autobiographical

Pact', namely an implied contract of 'authenticity' and 'truthfulness' between an autobiographer and his/her readers, where the text bears their name, and is a truthful representation of the author's life, written by the author about himself/herself, and all the action and settings are real, along with truthful alignment between the author, protagonist and narrator. However, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have highlighted the limitation that such pact imposes on an author's self-expression, asserting that "the term autobiography is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of Life-Narratives and life narrators in the West and elsewhere around the globe" (4). Such practices include (but are not limited to) testimonies, memoirs, prison literature, personal blogs, just to name a few. As authors differ in backgrounds, cultures and contexts, more flexible generic categorization of self-referential texts allowed the development of 'Autobiographical Fiction', which focalizes an entirely fictional setting, and draws from autobiographical elements in the author's life. This kind of theorization and expansion paved the way to the emerging theorization of Autofiction.

Autofiction is French writer Serge Doubrovsky's coinage of the term to describe his novel *Fils*, which he published in 1977. It mainly refers to an autobiography with fictionalized elements, or "fiction of strictly real events" (qtd. in Dix 2). Karen Ferreira-Meyers explains that Doubrovsky's coinage of Autofiction, is mainly to describe "a narrative which has a strictly autobiographical subject matter (certified by the nominal shared identity between author, narrator and main character), but whose manner, that is the narrative organization and stylistic craft, is novel-like" (28). Furthermore, she explains the distinction between Autofiction and Autobiography: "whereas traditional autobiography tries to describe a character which really existed in the most realistic and effective way possible, autofiction fictionalizes a character which really lived. That is the pragmatic point of view regarding autofiction raised by Doubrovsky in 1977" (205). Moreover, Eliane LecarmeTabone explained ways to approach the 'autofictional text', highlighting some of its key features, being a "narrative in the first person singular, with agreement of the names of the narrator/ the author, but with all the signs of fiction's implausibility" (qtd. in FerreiraMeyers 29). Jacques Lecarme went on to oppose Lejeune's previous concept of the 'Autobiographical Pact', and

emphasized the need for an “autofictional pact” (242) instead, questioning the need and ability to conform to the narrator/protagonist/author alignment. He highlighted the complex nature of mediation of historical events in an autobiographical text, without ‘narrativizing’, and therefore ‘fictionalizing’ said events. Thus, the ‘autofictional pact’ aims to resolve the problematic of ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’, concepts that Lessing already questions in her text.

Autofiction in the text is a canvas to embrace Lessing’s pervasive use of Memory, both as a theme and a technique, to mediate and revisit both public and private History. In her volume on Memory Studies *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, Astril Erll provisionally draws distinctions between ‘Individual’ (the cognitive process of ‘remembering’ an event), ‘Collective’ or ‘Cultural’ Memory as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (2). Max

Saunders proposed the idea that there is no such thing as absolute ‘truth’ or ‘factuality’ in Life-Writing processes, mainly because “our memories are always already textualized” (“Life-Writing, Cultural

Memory and Literary Studies”; 323), and that this entails the necessary transformation of a ‘remembered’ experience. He also believes that this is key to using Life-Writing texts as sources for Cultural Memory. Saunders also highlights the manifestations of Memory as a technique in life-writing. “One thing that life-writing shows is that while we may think of memory as somehow prior to auto/biography, or literature, or any form of textuality, our memories are always already textualized. They are by definition “after the event,” but also, as representations or mediations or narrativizations of the event, they have always begun to turn the event into something else” (323). Georg Misch also offers insight in this regard, emphasizing the ‘fictionalized’ nature of using memory as a life-writing technique, where “memory [is] viewed as a mode of creation, even invention, rather than as something which offers unproblematic access to past ‘realities’” (11). Memory is also seen as an “essentially a creative act” (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert 75).

In her chapter “The Literary Representation of Memory”, Birgit Neumann asserts that such complicated techniques employed in

Life-

Writing mostly rely on Memory. Neumann proposes that “numerous studies of various epochs and authors have shown that literature, both thematically and formally, is closely interwoven with the thematic complex of memory and identity” (333). She also highlights how ‘Memory’ and ‘Remembering’ as techniques work within a text and how they help to create Cultural Memory through individual and collective remembrance. She notes that, “the time structure, the narrative mediation, and the perspective structure of narrative texts are the central literary forms which permit the staging and reflection of memory-creation,” where “the memory culture include[s] experimentation with new concepts of memory, giving voice to hitherto marginalized memories and ultimately making visible the processes of individual and collective memory-creation” (340).

In *History and Memory*, Geoffrey Cubitt highlights the relations between memory and history. Memory, in his viewpoint, is reconstructing past experiences, both individual and collective, it can be associated with culture, social institutions or religion (2), and that history serves as a ‘critical framework’ for memory, where memories can be confirmed, contested, and/or reconstructed. The postcolonial self-referential writing of many women is described by postcolonial critic Bart Moore-Gilbert to be “pushing the text towards Historiography” (59), while it maintains its generic specificity as a personal narrative. Moore-Gilbert notes that this is a distinctive feature is mostly employed as a reaction to the rigidity of the traditional androcentric autobiography writing traditions, and the need to revisit personal and/or public history in a different light. Therefore, the mode is of Autofiction, both as a potential genre and as a technique, allows the effectuation of ‘historiography’ as a tool for reassessing and reconstructing Lessing’s past, life and ‘self/sel(-ves)’ and memory plays a vital role in mediating such process, being a useful tool to allow

Lessing’s attempts to create a narrative that infuses historicization of personal and public historical processes with the autobiographical experience.

Memory and History

As mentioned in the previous section of defining the key concepts, Memory, both as a theme and technique is used to mediate a writer's 'perceptions' of self, past, history, politics, race, gender, colonialism and imperialism in a given text. However, the workings of memory is an empirical matter, and writers have struggled with problematics of remembering and retrieval of their past lived experiences. From the onset of *Under My Skin*, Lessing pervasively uses meta-narration to question the (un)reliability of memory and its fragmented nature, describing it as a "careless and lazy organ, not only a self-flattering one, and not always self-flattering. More than once I have said, "No, I wasn't as bad as I've been thinking," as well as discovering that I was worse" (13). One always tries to trace their memories in pursuit of making new meanings of the past. However, relying on a coherent form of remembering is not always successful. Lessing writes about the evasiveness of her memories:

Had I written this when I was thirty, it would have been a pretty combative document. In my forties, a wail of despair and guilt: oh my God, how could I have done this or that? Now I look back at that child, that girl, that young woman, with a more and more detached curiosity. Old people may be observed peering into their pasts; Why? They are asking themselves. How did that happen? I try to see my past selves as someone else might, and then put myself back inside one of them, and am at once submerged in a hot struggle of emotion, justified by thoughts and ideas I now judge wrong. Besides, the landscape itself is a tricky thing. As you start to write at once the question begins to insist: Why do you remember this and not that? Why do you remember in every detail a whole week, month, more, of a long ago year, but then complete dark, a blank? How do you know that what you remember is more important than what you don't? (12)

She is aware of the complexity of the processes of remembering and retrieval of lived experiences, as well as the selective nature of memory in keeping or blurring certain events, and its unpleasant psychological effects on her. There is however an aspect of 'realness' to some of the memories that she emphasizes, where there are

"moments, incidents, *real memory*, I do trust" (13; my emphasis).

Hajer Alarem points out that “What is clear in autobiography is that memory speaks in multifarious voices, including ones that distort, change, silence, embellish, obscure, and even invent lives” (294). This is shown in Lessing’s awareness of the process of ‘construction’ of memories, and that not all of them are retrieved naturally or are purely authentic. Sometimes a memory is an amalgamation of input from external factors, such as the way other people remember and describe the same event, and the presence of visual material, like photographs to create that particular memory. It, then, becomes a constructed version of the ‘authentic’ memory, and the fine line between authenticity and fictiveness is blurred. In the text, she refers to this process: “A parent says, ‘we took you to the seaside, and you built a sandcastle, don’t you remember? Look here is the photo.’ And at once the child builds from the words and the photograph a memory, which becomes hers” (13). Critics have discussed Lessing’s use of photographs in her memoirs, and its relation to the construction of a certain version of a memory or an event, or the subversion of a narrative that the visual material was designed to tell, so that the memories become created and concocted to subscribe to her perspective, in which the verbal, in most of the instances is countering and subverting the visual. Anna Izabela Cichon analyzes Lessing’s use of photographs in *Under My Skin*:

[D]espite Lessing’s skepticism towards photography and her contestation of middle class culture, she does choose photographs for her auto-representation. In her memoirs the visual material is intertwined with the narrative, which is structured by parallel temporalgeographical patterns and stylized as inspection of photographs as if Lessing were turning the pages of the albums and looking at the images — those included and the missing ones, real pictures and imaginary ones, her “mental snapshots” as she calls them. (38)

Cichon also notes that Lessing is aware of when to reflect at length at some photographs, and when to be abrupt or brief (citing the brief captions she wrote on the images of her two abandoned children). On the other hand, Lessing scrutinizes the relationship with her mother in lengthy paragraphs. Moreover, Cichon also remarks that “throughout the memoirs Lessing exposes the falsifying nature of photographs: the stories

the images imply, she asserts, are different than her actual experience. She thematises the clash between the pictures on display and their personal meanings. Innocent scenes evoke painful recollections and activate emotions — such as anxiety, distress or unease” (39). This aware process of commentary on the already constructed memories aided by the presence of the visual aspect allows Lessing to subvert the narrative that these photographs dictate, and offer new interpretations.

Lessing also talks about the dilemma of ‘slipperiness’ of memory in her essay “Writing Autobiography”:

Memory isn’t fixed: it slips and slides about. It’s hard to match one’s memories of one’s life with the solid fixed account of it that is written down [...]. Our own views of our lives change all the time, different at different times. Once I read autobiography as what the writer thought about his or her life. Now, I think, ‘that’s what they thought at that time.’ An interim report – that is what an autobiography is. (92)

This sentence shows the shift in Lessing’s view and understanding of the genre in the process of writing *Under My Skin*, foregrounding the possibility of reading the text under the generic theorization of Autofiction, where ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ can function together effectively in recreating ‘reality’, which will be showed in the next section of the paper.

Building on Moore-Gilbert’s view of the historiographical nature of post-modern writing, some critics have viewed *Under My Skin* as an example of said nature. Lessing notes in the text that “Women often get dropped from memory, and then history” (12). Her reflections on the falling Empire and colonialism while she situating her younger self and family within the historical context of her time produces a narrative that interweaves personal and historical processes, and therefore carves a distinctive place for women’s contribution to recounting history. Susan Watkins talks about Lessing’s blurring between the personal/political dichotomies, elaborating that writing histories that are at one and the same time personal and political is particularly key to [Lessing’s] late work. This project of making connections between personal and national identity is one that both returns her to her childhood in Africa and necessitates a reappraisal of the status of official and ‘fictionalised’

accounts of the past, particularly her own accounts of the impact of colonisation and Empire on her family, herself and the native African population in Southern Rhodesia. (138)

Lessing depicts the challenging life her parents led due to World War I. Her father was injured in the trenches, and got his leg amputated as a result. When the family moved to Africa, the farm they bought failed their ambitions of wealth and a comfortable life, resulting in feelings of despair and nostalgia to the 'glory' of home, that is England. Her mother, especially, dwelled in those emotions, failing to live an English Edwardian middle-class life, and as a result, was an authoritative figure of a resentful nature. This resulted in young Doris holding an immense grudge and anger, and refuses to become like her mother, and even resembling her mother to the evil powers of colonialism. Being British and born to invader-settler parents, Lessing's position is a sensitive one. Some critics have seen her writing about the former British Empire as ambivalent, and her attitude in colonial resistance subtle, due to the many instance of equivocation between herself, family and black farmers. However, she clearly expresses her position saying that "all my life I have been the child who says the Emperor is naked" (17), this revoking any 'ambivalence' in her attitude towards the colonialist project. "I read history with conditional respect" she says, because more often than not, "the actual participants keep their counsel, and watch ironically from the shadows" (11-12).

Autofiction as canvas of reconciling 'Truth' and Fiction

At the beginning of the text, Lessing questions the elusiveness of concepts such as 'Truth' and 'identity': "You cannot sit down to write about yourself without rhetorical questions of the most tedious kind demanding attention. Our old friend, the Truth, is first. The truth [...] how much of it to tell, how little?" (11). Furthermore, she – early on – foregrounds the conceptual approach of constructing multiple sel(-ves) and identities of herself in the text, by highlighting that the change in perspective as time passes changes how we see and reinterpret the 'Truth': "Telling the truth or not telling it, and how much, is a lesser problem than the one of shifting perspectives, for you see your life differently at different stages, like climbing a mountain while the

landscape changes with every turn in the path” (13).

Lessing admitted that many of her works of ‘fiction’ reflect more ‘truth’ than the autobiographical projects. Works of fiction, according to her, are “true in atmosphere, feeling, ‘truer’ than this record, which is trying to be factual” (162). If writing fiction presents more plausible truths about the autobiographer, then this is where Autofiction aims to reconcile the challenge of generic disruption and crossing of its borders. She discusses this point further, in an interview:

I think autobiographical novels are truer than autobiography, even if half the novel is untrue [...]. Martha Quest, which is full of made-up characters and invented situations, in fact gives the flavor of that time

[Southern Rhodesia from 1919 to 1949] much more than *Under My Skin*. I am too old now to put all that violent emotion in it. (n.pag.)

She refers to the same idea in *Under My Skin*, admitting that “There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth” (314). This vision corroborates the re-conceptualizations of the writing conventions of self-referential texts. The arbitrary nature of ‘truth’ in Lessing’s autobiographical writing allows her to create multiple personas, identities, past sel(-ves) that are all different, yet each one reflects a certain aspect of her character, or a specific phase in her life. Such

‘fictionalized’ depiction of one’s own life trajectory and development is one key aspect of autofictional writing, and is congruent with the viewpoint of critic Hywel Dix in his book *Autofiction in English*. Dix posits that Autofiction “is less concerned with faithfully reporting what its protagonist did, or even how that person thought and felt, and is more concerned with the speculative question of how that subject might respond to new and often imagined environments” (6). Paul John Eakin, similarly, asserts that the “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and selfcreation” (3). Lessing further problematizes telling the ‘truth’ to readers, and the challenges of the selection process of what to and what not to include. She remarks:

Telling the truth about yourself is one thing, if you can, but what about the other people? I may easily write about my life until the year I

left Southern Rhodesia in 1949, because there are few people left who can be hurt by what I say; I have had to leave out, or change—mostly a name or two—very little [...]. But Volume Two, that is from the time I reached London, will be different matter, even if I follow the example of Simone de Beauvoir who said that about some things she had no intention of telling the truth. (Then why bother?—the reader must be expected to ask). I have known not a few of the famous, and even one or two of the great, but I do not believe it is the duty of friends, lovers, comrades, to tell all. The older I get the more secrets I have, never to be revealed and this, I know, is a common condition of people of my age. (11)

Lessing is aware that the process of inclusion/omission of truths and facts, which can either be deliberate to spare cultural and/or personal sensitivities, or done by the workings of slippery memory, is in all cases a problematic that has long been debated both in Autobiography and Memory Studies, and one that she contemplates often in the text. “When you write about anything—in a novel, an article—you learn a lot you did not know before. I learned a good deal writing this. Again and again I have had to say, “That was the reason, was it? Why didn’t I think of that before?” Or even, “Wait ... it wasn’t like that” she remarks (13). In “Writing Autobiography”, she reflects on the same idea:

When you are shaping an autobiography, just as when you shape a novel, you have to decide what to leave out. Yet it should be like life, sprawling, big baggy, full of false starts, loose ends, people you met once and never think of again... And as you write your autobiography, it has to have a good deal in common with a novel... In short, we have a story. What doesn’t fit into the story, the theme, gets cut out. (98-99)

Her awareness of the process of the ‘act’ of autobiographical writing gives her more agency to ‘construct’ reality the way she sees it: I spent a good part of my childhood ‘fixing’ moments in my mind. I had to fight to establish a reality of my own, against an insistence from the adults that I should accept theirs. Pressure had been put on me to admit that what I knew was true was not so. I am deducing this. Why else my preoccupation that went on for years: this is the truth, this is what happened, hold on to it, and don’t let them talk you out of it. (13-14)

This is evident in, for instance, the recreation of the event of her birth. She reconstructed the scene and concocted a story about how it was quite a happy memory, although it wasn't (at least to her mother). She depicts it saying "I was giving myself a 'good birth' [...]. The actual birth was not only a bad one, but made worse by how it was reported to me, so the storyteller invented a birth as the sun rose with light and warmth coming fast into the enormous lamp lit room" (21). In an interview with J. Daymond, Lessing also admitted to using various narrative and novelistic techniques in writing the two parts of her autobiography *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*: "That's a novelist's technique. The thing is also when you use dialogue; it's a novelist's technique because you don't remember the exact words, or very seldom, but you do remember none or less what was said, so you invent the dialogue" (231). In other instances, Lessing mixes narrative voices, using a wide range from 1st to 3rd person method of narration, sometimes all together in one sentence:

And then the moment when Daddy captures his little daughter ... His great hands go to work on my ribs. My screams, helpless, hysterical, desperate. Then tears. But we were being taught how to be good sports. For being a good sport was necessary for the middle class life. To put up with "ragging" and with being hurt, with being defeated in games, being "tickled" until you wept, was a necessary preparation. (31)

She reflects on the memory of her father holding her as a child from the outward perspective of the narrator, then immediately shifts to 1st person to describe her evoked feelings of restlessness and discomfort as he touched her, and her apparent disgust and suffering at the attempt. Later in the following sentence she shifts to 2nd person to address the readers, in an attempt to involve them into the narrative and let them imagine and feel her dilemma.

In her book *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Leigh Gilmore, suggests that "the subject of autobiography is distributed across the historical self and the textual self, both of which are versions of the self who writes" (86). This is reflected in Lessing's awareness of her position as author/narrator/protagonist, but more importantly in her musings on her past multiple changing 'sel(-ves)

and identities (historical self), and her opinion of them later in life as narrator (textual self). In the text, she remarks that “some experiences gain more focus when we are twenty, others when we are thirty or forty” (109), an accurate explanation of the conundrum of ‘truthfulness’ in the self-representation process. Lessing, for instance, reflects on more than one of her past ‘social selves’, namely “Tigger” and “Hostess”. She describes the “Hostess” persona (referring to her in 3rd person) as “bright, helpful, attentive, receptive to what is expected, very strong indeed.” She explains that such persona was created to perform as “a shield, for the private self. How useful it had been when being interviewed, photographed, a public person for public use” (20). “Tigger”, a character from Winnie the Pooh children’s animation, was used by Lessing to define a “clumsy” aspect of her as a young girl:

I was the fat and bouncy Tigger. I remained Tigger until I left Rhodesia, for nothing would stop friends and comrades using it. Nicknames are potent ways of cutting people down to size. I was Tigger Taylor, Tigger Wisdom, then Tigger Lessing, the last fitting me even less than the others. Also comrade Tigger. This personality was expected to be brash, jokey, clumsy, and always ready to be a good sport, that is, to laugh at herself, apologize, clown, confess inability. An extrovert. In that it was a protection for the person I really was, ‘Tigger’ was an aspect of the ‘Hostess.’ (89)

So, in creating multiple personas and depicting them in her text, Lessing allows for a possible re-reading of her autobiographical work as autofictional.

Conclusion

Lessing’s compelling writing style of *Under My Skin* challenges the conventional writing modes of self-referential texts and allows new readings of the text in new lights. The text’s rich nature and diverse style allows a reassessment of its generic categorization in light of the Autofiction theory. Lessing recreates memory, personas, fictive sel(ves), personal and historical events that shaped her as a young English girl raised in Africa, and allows re-approaching her autobiographical works as fictionalized accounts rather than ones of pure autobiographical, confessional nature. The blurring of generic boundaries between life-

writing and fiction is possible with the mediation of memory, which is a powerful, yet arbitrary and complex tool that gives Lessing the agency to present her own perceptions of the past, herself, family and the world at large. By approaching lifenarratives as fictionalized, more space is given to women to write about their lives, as they see and perceive it, without the fear of falling into the trap of avoiding creative endeavors because they are not taken too seriously. Venturing in the acts of self-representation becomes limited for women when much of what they write is taken for granted as autobiographical. By re-reading women's literary production as autofictional, we allow them more freedom of expression, and by extension a better understanding to the complex notions affecting their lives, be it race, gender, politics, or otherwise.

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