

Martha on a Quest

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Introduction

Martha Quest the book is named after the protagonist, and the title itself is revealing in that it blatantly uses the word Quest. As the author Lessing herself admits in her second autobiography *Walking in the Shade* that “[F]irst novels, particularly by women, are often attempts at self-definition” (15), it would be not too daring to say that it is a book about the personal quest of the protagonist as a record of the author’s own.

Previous research abounds in the discussion of Martha’s self-exploration. Elizabeth Maslen’s book *Doris Lessing* adopts a social perspective and argues that the self-exploration of Martha is still constrained or even defined by the social factors and people around her in that it just takes the form of her attempt to deal with different relations in her life. This point is resonated by Fishburn in her essay "The Nightmare Repetition: The Mother-Daughter Conflict in Doris Lessing’s *Children of Violence*". Fishburn employs Erich Neumann’s theory of four-stage feminine development in the analysis of Martha’s self-exploration. According to the theory, Martha enters the second stage at the opening of the story when the girl needs a role model, and her mother unfortunately cannot be one. The story of *Martha Quest* ends at the third stage when the female finds “a rescuing hero who liberates the young woman from the controlling father but yokes her to conventional marriage under new male authority”—her husband (Paglia, 6). It is therefore suggested that Martha is repeating her mother’s life track though she has been taking a “non-mother” movement throughout the whole story. Solinger’s essay "Nostalgia for the Future: Remembrance of Things to Come in Doris Lessing’s *Martha Quest*" uses the term “nostalgia” to explain the mentality of “living somewhere else but not here”—that both Martha and her mother are experiencing this feeling. This point is also resonated by Visel in “Liberation and Taboo: Normative Sexuality in Lessing’s Fiction”. Visel analyzes this novel from the perspective of the sexual behavior of the characters in Lessing’s other novels and comes to a similar conclusion that

Martha can only fracture but never smash the molds which have formed her.

All in all, various perspectives have been adopted in the previous research, which agree on one point: Martha's "breakaway" cannot be called as complete, and she is still defined and constrained by the people around her. Various perspectives have been adopted in the analysis of the self-exploration theme, among which the autobiographical perspective and the psychoanalytical perspective are the most common ones. But it is known that this novel takes the African colonized land as the main setting, then it would be unavoidable to take the "space" into consideration—the space of the colonized land as well as that of their home country because the keynote of those times is the colonization of the land and white settlers' efforts of constructing "place out of space" (Tuan 6). The theme of self-exploration of the protagonist is well illustrated through the space she occupies; this perspective, however, has not been discussed deservingly. This paper intends to answer the question of how Lessing adopts the space in the novel to illustrate its self-exploration theme. The space that the protagonist takes are associated with every important stage of her life in that she takes space as the medium to assert herself, and conversely space turns to define her as well.

The first part of the paper will start the discussion of the relations between Martha's self-exploration and the space during her puberty in the farm. Martha is in constant uncomfortableness with her mother mainly because she aims to break away from her parents' life pattern, especially from her mother's stereotyped ideas. This is shown through the fact that she feels limited towards the land of the farm and insists to take different geographical places from her mother. The thoughts she presents impress the readers as surprisingly avant-garde and intelligent, and Lessing attributes this to the Jewish friends of her who send books to her (Sicher 57). The second part of the paper discusses the sports club life period after Martha moves to town. Martha actually gets the chance to leave the farm when one of her Jewish friends Joss Cohen writes to her about a job in town in their uncle's company. The paradox is that during this period she sets out for independence but people around her in the town are still introduced by her mother. Martha is quite confused about her life direction—torn between the urge to be different from the others and the prompt pleasure in the club, and this mentality can be seen through her aimless drifting in and out of different bars in the town. Martha's love affair with Adolph happens simultaneously with the club life period. With this man she dates—Adolph the bandleader in the club and a Jew, Martha goes against her own people—the white community and their racial system. A detailed analysis of her unreasonable anger and unpleasant memory by the sight of Adolph's room will be included, which proves that she is indulged in the pleasure of being unorthodox. She gets finished with Adolph for his inappropriate behavior of spying on her and boasting about their relations. Douglas shows up in her life, and they settle for a marriage very

quickly. The third part of this paper consists mainly her transactions with Douglas. Before Martha realizes, she is already preparing a wedding with him. Though her inner voice defies this decision, she still continues with the marriage procedures as if she is carried along by some other power—it is the recognition from the others and the racial correctness of this decision. As a result, instead of any excitement, Martha feels disappointed with herself and limited so that the free will of her puberty cannot be regained any more when she looks into the land because Douglas is the barrier.

Farm Period: The Rebel

The farm period, compared to a self-search of what Martha wants to become, is more like a protest against what she does not want to become. Martha is a fourteen-year-old girl in her puberty, there is no clear sign of what she wants to search for but many signs of her determination to be different from her parents. This point is clearly illustrated through Martha's behavior of constantly challenging her mother's spatial domain to demonstrate to be different and non-traditional.

To understand this point better, we need to clarify firstly what her mother's domain includes. The first and foremost domain is the domestic place. Robinson and the other authors in their book *Africa and the Victorians* proposed that one of the major incentive for colonization was private commerce. With this purpose in mind, one crucial thing to do when arriving in Africa was to develop their capitalism, starting from claiming ownership to some land by "fencing up certain area" (Rosner 69). For white settlers like Lessing's parents, the distinction between the inside and outside was of utmost importance. Colonization was therefore closely connected with the colonizers' efforts of making "Space"—the African space into "Place"—the domestic space within the fences (Tuan 6). The mentality behind this behavior was that the white settlers felt threatened by the African land, and the fenced up domestic space functioned to protect them from the lurking danger. Apart from this, the windows in the rooms turned into the medium through which the horrifying space seems less so when it was aesthetically put into people's view.

In contrast to the white women staying inside the domestic place, Martha shows a favor towards the outside space—nature. Most of the scenes in the farm between Martha and her mother happens on the veranda; the first property of the veranda is its domestic property. Lessing's debt to Olive Schreiner is well known. J. M. Coetzee's comments on Schreiner's farm concludes two elements: "the farm is also a place of human habitation, and indeed so human in its bigotry, hypocrisy and idleness that all that redeems it from being an African town in miniature is its setting in nature. The farm thus has two aspects: nature and town. These aspects merely coexist. They form no synthesis" (Coetzee 64). Martha's parents settle on a place far from the

town and use materials directly from the bush for the house construction, but they cannot get rid of the town-ness because they are human being. People are even more so on the veranda in their bigotry and hypocrisy because the veranda is part of the domestic place. Most frequent topics on the veranda then are their self-conceited degrading of the native race as well as the trivialities of marriages of young women with a secret sense of vying against each other. Her friend Marnie talks about another friend Stephanie's marriage, but "find[s] herself confronted by Martha's frowning eyes, she wished she might return to the veranda" (23). Veranda is positioned as the domestic place where women gossip about marriage and household trivialities. When, on the veranda, Mrs. Quest shows her agreement with Mrs. Van Rensbergs in her opinions on the tactics of getting married. Martha blows into a rage and accuses her mother as "loathsome, bargaining and calculating...you are disgusting" (15). This response is somewhat surprising, but what is revealing is that Martha runs into the bush. Here the innocence of nature and the calculating humanity are set as opposite sides. Teenagers in Lessing's story are usually entrusted with the hope to recognize the humanity and start anew. For Martha, the calculating words of her mother behind which is the plundering capitalism of colonization itself irritates her so much that she dashes into the bush angrily to show her disagreement and intention to be different from either of the women on the veranda as a woman. She then stays under the big tree and even gets in close touch with nature sitting against the big tree and feeling the roots hard on her back like a second spine. She thinks that "she would not be like Mrs. Van Rensbergs, a fat and earthy housekeeping woman; she would not be bitter and nagging and dissatisfied like her mother" (20).

The second property of the veranda lies in that it functions as the transitional zone between the house raised high on its eminence into the blue and sweeping currents of air and the bush and the mealie fields that people look over. In *Going Home*, Lessing speaks appreciatively of the sense of empty space in Africa: "Africa is scattered all over with white men who push out and away from cities and people, to remote farms and outposts, seeking solitude" (11). Martha's parents' house in the story, as it is with Lessing's parents' house in the reality back then, has the character of being far away from the town and elevated from the surrounding bushes. "My parents have chosen a site which the neighbors all warned would give them trouble, on top of a hill" (Under 54). Anthony Chennells comments in "Doris Lessing: Rhodesian Novelist" that "Lessing also seems to have identified with settlers who saw in the empty land an opportunity for self-realization and for the free development of personality, impossible to achieve in England or even in Rhodesia's town" (4). Taking this into consideration, then it is inferred that sitting on the veranda and looking out into the land of immensity, though still under the protection of the domestic place from the scorching sunlight, give people prospect of self-realization. As James Tyner says, "it is who we are through where we are" (261), space also defines people. The veranda blurs the boundary of the African

space and the domestic place—it is a place within the inside area but still offers the view of the land for further prospect.

Martha's rebellious behavior on her way to self-discovery is well illustrated on the veranda the transitional zone. Martha usually sits in the sunlight and, instead of gossiping like the others, reads books that might be regarded as unorthodox. What's more, she sits "on the steps in full sunshine, clumsily twisting herself to keep the glare from her book with her own shadow" (9). She refuses to move even if her mother constantly alerts her every 30 minutes that she would get sunstroke if she did not come into the shade. But the veranda cannot be called a comfortable choice for reading not only because of the dazzling sunshine but also because she is obviously disturbed by the adults' talk. But at the same time, she would not move when there is "nothing to prevent her moving somewhere else" (9). Her unreasonable persistence to read on the sun-filled steps and angry looks at her mother are childish parade of rebellion. By staying at place which her mother does not allow her to stay and doing different things, she is trying to differentiate herself.

At first, she reads a book on popular science but is stiffened into an unmistakable resentment even by the title itself because the book has a factual calm air of writing and is too distant from the uncomfortable emotions she has then. She puts that book down and picks up a book of Ellis on sex. As a matter of fact, she has no interest in this book since "it has so little to do with her own problems" (11), but still reads it because she wants to annoy her mother with this book on sex. But her attempt is frustrated when Mrs. Quest admits her behavior and regard the book she reads will do no harm. "she felt that in some contradictory way she had been driven to use this book as a means of asserting herself, and now found the weapon had gone limp and useless in her hands" (13). This bigotry of trying to annoy her mother is almost lovely if not absurd; what Martha misses to understand is that her mother does not intend to make her into a copy of herself.

Martha's insistence in her deviation from her mother without a true understanding about her mother is a proof for her immaturity in her self-exploration. The elevated and desolate position chosen for their houses proves that the Quests have stronger aspiration for self-realization. Those moments of sitting on the transitional zone of the veranda with the African land in front of her view are when Mrs. Quest is reminded the most of the original hopes and wishes. On the one hand, she keeps alerting Martha away from the improper behavior for their standard; on the other hand, she has expectation for Martha and takes pride in her. Though somewhat patronizing, she says to Mrs. Van Rensbergs that Martha is not going to be the same like the other farmers' daughters—that she is going to college and work as a career woman. But Martha does not see through this, she resents the ideological system behind her mother. From her perspective, even the friendship between her mother and Mrs. Van Rensbergs is something that "had survived just because of what had been left out, everything of importance, that is" (14). But without a proper

understanding about the aspirations and powerlessness of her parents, she could not achieve her own realization either. So Lessing writes “but then, who was she to be like?” (20).

Martha’s disagreement with white settlers’ lifestyle and ideology could also be seen through her feelings towards the land itself. The house the Quests live in is in the midst of the currents of air and immensity of azure. One would feel the expanse of the land when one looks from the house with the surroundings just extending from that center into immensity. Surprisingly, Martha only feels enclosed, a sense of suffocation instead of freedom. “...and that was so familiar the vast landscape caused her only the prickling feeling of claustrophobia” (11). This claustrophobia comes not from any spatial closure but from her relationship with her parents. The land in front of her represents the lifestyle of her parents, which is exactly what she wants to get away from. Solinger uses the word “nostalgia” to term this feeling, illustrating that Martha has this claustrophobia because she is not living “here” in the farm but “somewhere else”. “Nostalgia is a way of imagining the possibility of a world that is actually purer, one less flawed than the one we know we must inhabit.... It's something that anchors us emotionally to a sense that things should and could be repaired” (Ishiguro 3).

The paradox of Martha is that she despises the viewpoint of her mother but she is still influenced and bound by the inherited ideologies from her parents. The position she takes when looking at the Afrikaners proves this point. When she stands on the veranda of the Socrates—the town store, looking down at the various people gathering in front of there, she realizes her own collective way of recognition: “she could not remember a time when she had not thought of people in terms of groups, nations or color of skin first, and as people afterwards” (67). Her mother doesn’t want her “to know Jewish shopkeepers” (20) because the Jews exploit the natives worse than anyone. This is obviously stereotyped prejudice because her mother does not have much contact with the Jews except for her occasional visits to the town store opened by the Jews, not to mention that she herself also exploits the native people hardly. But the panoramic view she takes over people from the veranda judging them parallels her mother’s—judgements on the Jewish boys. The books recommended by the Cohen boys Martha reads also prove this point. She reads books about economy and psychology, gets to know herself better and better. But Martha feels that she has been marked fatally forever “for the feeling of fate, of doom, was the one message they all had in common” (19). That is to say that her parents’ influence on her is unalterable, and it would be too late to change herself. She gets more and more information about herself but less and less ideas of what to do.

The confused state of wanting to escape from her parents’ lifestyle and the futility to do so is her current situation that she has to face. When her father sincerely suggests that she should leave home if she really considers herself to have outgrown her mother, she hesitates—un-expectantly.

In her situation, "...she was wanting someone to take the responsibility for her; she needed a rescue" (82). Lacking a clear self-assertion, Martha is just fighting against her mother but does not know for what. Previous accusations against her mother and the symbolic departure from the veranda seem futile when she eventually just "return[s] to the house on the hill". She takes the rebellion but still needs someone to rely on for real action to get out. This confused state is the basic keynote for Martha during puberty.

Worse, not knowing what she is fighting against but merely full of the rebellious spirit, Martha might even be fooled or taken advantage by people around her—she fights against her mother's objection and insists to dress up like a mature woman to go to the party at Marnie's house only to find that she is the only overdressed person while the others are just in their daily clothes. She does not feel the triumph of winning her mother but only the stupidity that she makes herself a fool making this party a chance to claim her adult-ship. She feels stupid that a man tries to take advantage of her because her dress makes him believe that is what she wants from the party. When changing off that dress, she stands in front of a full-length mirror and checks her own body. With the windows "open to the veld" and the courage inspired by nature, she, for the first time of her life, realizes that "she [does] not know herself" (107). After the party she still returns home but has lost the triumph over her mother.

The first epiphany comes when she realizes that her rebellion is aimless, and therefore meaningless—and that "a new one should begin" (108). Exactly at this moment, the long-desired guidance comes Joss Cohen the Jewish friend writes to inform her of the job vacancy in the town, which she soon makes the decision to take. She bids farewell to All the natural sceneries she has secretly kept in mind as her own. They used to symbolize her differences and her rebellion against the stale life pattern of her parents, but now they do not move her. With the new and independent space which she finds for herself in town, she starts her new journey.

Club Life Period: The Unorthodox Woman

Martha's struggle for independence from family has not yet ended when her small room in the town is invaded by her parents. She is very irritated when she sees her parents standing in her room, uninvited, realizing that her mother has rearranged her room, she decides to change her dwelling immediately "for another which would be free of her mother's atmosphere and influence" (126). Everything just goes back to the old form. There is a moment when Martha could not even distinguish whether she is still at the farm or in her own room in the town. Confusing her current landlord Mrs. Gunn with her mother's frequent visitor Mrs. Van Rensbergs, "There is no need, Mrs. Van Rens--' Martha stopped, 'I mean, Mrs. Gunn, I eat like a horse" (127). Different from the

previous behavior of trying to assert herself by defining space she occupies, this confusion proves that the space also defines people. There is certain assurance—a completely independent space of one's own that Martha needs from this room to establish her own determination for more self-search and new identity.

Then Martha's life gets into a different stage of club life when she starts to go out with Donovan nearly every night. It is totally different from her previous farm life: she wears what she chooses, and the bar is the space where she frequents the most. Yet it is a transitional period. She is still under her mother's influence, for Donovan is introduced to her indirectly by her mother.

This town life, with its physical closeness, gives her a new kind of problem. The enclosed space of the club life reflects the fidgety souls of the young generation white settlers—usually the young generation who are born in Africa but identify themselves as British people. Martha and Donovan are among them; they dance sometimes on the veranda but normally stay all night just inside some room. They are confined to their prejudices since the narrow indoor space of the bar they go to defines their horizon. Martha comes to realize the meaninglessness of this life, but she could not resist the temptation. "...it was also saying that Donovan was an unworthy successor to Joss...however, follow him she did, for she was intoxicated" (146). she feels vaguely that she needs to concentrate on study—for the qualification as a secretary and independence at the earliest possibility. But she could not resist the temptation to go to the dancing parties nearly every night with Donovan.

Despite the truth that they are just idling their time away, they both blame the land, the space, the country they live in for what they cannot achieve. In their opinions, the land has already determined people's fate. Donovan complains that he should have become a dress designer. But he does not because "what can one do but go into statistics and wait for one's chief to retire..." (202). Martha comes to understand why she still goes to the parties with Donovan even though she is in constant struggle and bewilderment. They have a mutual conviction that if they had been born into other circumstances, things would be different. The examples of Martha's Jewish friends, however, shows the opposite to what they believe. The paradox of the club people is that they feel constrained in the land and unsatisfied with the imbalance of numbers of men and women, but they feel that they can do nothing. They just head to the same club every day, loathes the idea of going to bed even if there is nothing left to do in the late night and dash to the next place even if they do not feel like doing that. Their drifting among different indoor places every night is actually their confusion over a clear life goal. This is also true when it comes to Martha and her struggles.

Martha gets in touch with the Communist group at this time, and is influenced by the class ideas of the leftist group. She used to see people first in terms of groups, nations and color of skin

first, then in terms of people. But she decides to go out with Adolph, a Jew. Adolph is an instrument player in the Club that Martha usually goes to, rich but grumpy and obsessed with persecution complex because of his own sense of inferiority about his race. This causes silent protesting stare from all her friends in the club because Jewish people are not regarded as their own group. During the whole time when they are going out together, there is no sign of Martha loving this man; "She was thinking that she does not like this man, and she wanted to go home" (242). Most of the unpleasantness between them is the result of the fact that he is a pathetic man constantly confronting Martha with his own sense of inferiority only in the hope that she would deny his words. The more this unpleasantness happens, the more Martha is reinforced that she is different from her club friends and her mother. Therefore, Martha goes out with a man she despises because she is still rebelling.

That Martha's relations with Adolph is still more about the rebellion against the life pattern of her parents can also be seen in her response at Adolph's room arrangement. Adolph's room has a striking resemblance to her parents' house, reminding her of the farm life—what she has been trying so hard to escape:

There was a side veranda, and he unlocked a door and they went into a large room that had curving windows all around the front, overlooking the garden. This gave a tweak at her memory; and she stood still, frowning, wondering why nostalgia was sickening her nerves...(247).

This tweak at memory therefore activates her rebelling spirit and gives her a drainage to her confusion over her own aimlessness. Sicher and Weinhouse in their book *Under Postcolonial Eyes: Figuring the "Jew" in Contemporary British Writing* proposes that the prevailing anti-Semitism in Lessing's time is factual, so it would not be far from the truth if it is said that Adolph as a Jew in the novel is a pariah—his situation is no better than the blacks in the dark land. The Jew are regarded as the sexual danger like the blacks but also "function as a screen for an even more unacceptable relationship with the Blacks or the Colored Other" (60). But the physical uncomfortableness that Martha feels when Adolph glares at her body could almost be explained as the seduction tool for her, then "she was being pulled down a current which she did not understand..." (248) The irony is that she tries to protest the pull of her family, and after all gets pulled into the sexual relationship with Adolph. She is standing opposite against the club people who she calls philistines for being racially biased and her family as well as all the value system she has been brought up with when she goes out with Adolph. This relationship, however, is not based on the love romance that it is supposed to, Martha is rather pulled down by a too strong urge to fight. People try to control the space, but conversely, they are controlled by the space they occupy. Martha decides to start a relationship with Adolph because it would be regarded an relationship

unblessed by “her people”. She struggles so much to get away from the farm with the hope that she would make a change and find herself. Her plunge into relationship with Adolph, however, only proves otherwise—she is still the girl trying to rebel.

New Journey: The Bewildered Newly-Wed

Martha gradually finds Adolph quite annoying, always fantasizing and interrogating her relations with other men. Then she was told by Donovan and Stella that Adolph has been spying on her all the nights to assure her fidelity and boasting around the town about their love affairs. Stella does the breakup on behalf of her, and her relations with Adolph is called to an end.

Martha’s romance with Douglas stems from her flight from her parents and efforts of trying to find someone or something to resort to. It starts when she decides to break away from the club life. Her journey of self-exploration starts from her rebellion against her root family—her marriage with Douglas also happens because of her parents. She has decided to get away from the club life after her breakup with Adolph and refused the invitation to one party, but the letter from her mother changes her mind. It is a twelve-page letter complaining in minute details how ungrateful Martha is for not writing a letter back home, how ignorant and disgusting the houseboys are, and how the financial situation at home is really worrisome. Accusations and control of her mother, racial prejudice and poverty—these are exactly what Martha wants to get away from when she moves to the town hoping for a new life. But this letter recreates the farm life in front of her eyes. She “feels being caged and imprisoned” (289), and the best way to get away from these is some delicious pleasure of a party. She goes back to the party she has once refused. There she meets Douglas who impresses her as warm, intelligent, serious and responsible and starts to go out with him.

The feeling Martha holds towards Douglas’s room, in contrast to that towards Adolph’s, also coincides with her initial and misguided respect to Douglas. She sees the ledgers and files from the office. The elements in a person’s room are regarded as manifestations of this person. She sees things from work at his room and feels assured that he could be reliable so that “her respect for him was instantly restored” (302). She tells him about her past plan to go back to England and work as a nursemaid or a freelance writer, and Douglas listens carefully and comments seriously whether he agrees or objects. The different feelings that Martha embraces for the rooms of Douglas and Adolph decide the way she relates herself to each of them. Adolph’s room reminds her of her farm life, and thus ironically provides her a feeling that she is going against her home community. But the room after all leaves her with the feeling of injury Adolph’s constant interrogation, spying and boasting. With Douglas, it is a woman’s respect with sensible

judgements.

Her respect for Douglas, however, is not enough for her to get married with him. The archetype of Douglas is Frank, Lessing's first husband, and Lessing has confirmed this point in the first volume of her autobiography *Under My Skin*: "I was not in love with him" (206). She calls the happy mood of surrounding people "delirium of excitement", but she herself is "quietly miserable" (206). For more details, Lessing gives a record in the novel. Martha soon finds "some kind of discrepancy" because Douglas is quite a simple and light-headed man who has got engaged with some girl back in England he barely knows through a letter while worrying about money for the marriage. Towards Douglas, she is "maternal" (302) because they are not on the same level in their spiritual maturity. If she is asked whether she wants to marry Douglas, the answer is that "she would rather die" (302). After they make the engagement decision, Martha feels panic because she does not want to do so.

She feels "spiritually free once again" (304) when she decides to ring from her office to tell Douglas that they have made a terrible mistake with their engagement. But when she gets there, people from work all congratulate her as if saying that she is doing well for herself. She gets unprecedented tolerance at work for being late or even absent. Stella is winking at her secretly at parties as if to say her affair with Adolph has passed and she is finally back to the right path. She has been pushed forward in this just because this seems the right thing to do. Therefore, Martha, though she feels it is the right thing to do to get married, but she does not show excitement of newly-engaged but rather the confinement she has been feeling from the very beginning of the story. For her, marriage with Douglas means that it is either the town or the farm, the marriage with one man or another; and this "fatally limited" (312) track dissatisfies her. She has been looking for a breakaway but finds herself back to the starting point. When they are back to her parents' farm, she gets up in the night and looks into the immense African land to recover her youthful intimacy with it. Her rebellious spirit expressed in her attachment to the nature is now lost, and "she could feel nothing. There was a barrier, and that barrier was Douglas" (318). The engagement is accompanied by her being carried along in the custom of other people. But she is still in her early 20s and the realization that she has been influenced in her important decision by the others could put her on the real journey of self-quest. (add how important of the immense space of the land to her, but now it was blocked) used to find intimacy, but now nothing.

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