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Background and Influences

Doris Lessing was born in Persia in 1919, of British parents. Her father, Alfred Tayler, had fought in the First World War. He was badly wounded, and as a result of his injuries he had a leg amputated. He subsequently married Maud McVeigh, one of the nurses who had looked after him in hospital. After the war he went to work for the Imperial Bank of Persia in Tehran, but on leave in 1925 he went to the Empire Exhibition in London and was attracted to the idea of farming in Southern Rhodesia. On impulse he went to Africa the same year, taking his wife and two young children, and bought three thousand acres of land with a government loan.

Doris and her younger brother Harry were brought up on an isolated farm where their father made a very meagre living growing maize and tobacco. Both children went to boarding schools. Doris attended a Catholic convent in Salisbury, followed by a year at a state school. She finished her formal education at the age of 14, deliberately thwarting her parents’ academic ambitions for her, but continued to educate herself by reading very widely. She began her working life in Salisbury at a telephone company and later, having learnt typewriting and shorthand, worked first as a legal secretary, and then as a Hansard secretary in the Rhodesian parliament.

In Salisbury Doris Tayler led the lively social life of a young, unmarried white girl in the 1930s. She met a civil servant called Frank Wisdom whom she married in 1939. They had two children, John and Jean, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1943. During the war Doris became increasingly interested in politics, and she joined a small Marxist group where she met a half-Jewish German refugee called Gottfried Lessing, who she married in 1945. Their son Peter was born in 1947, and they divorced in 1949. Mrs Lessing has not remarried, and has said:

R. Whittaker, Doris Lessing
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‘I do not think marriage is one of my talents. I’ve been happier unmarried than married.’

In 1949 she came to London, bringing her son and the manuscript of her first novel, The Grass is Singing. This was accepted by Michael Joseph, the first publisher she approached, and was an immediate success when it was published in 1950. She has remained in England ever since, although she has travelled widely. She is reticent about her private life, and interviews over the years have been confined mainly to discussions about her work.

Doris Lessig’s background has been a powerful influence on her fiction. She has written, ‘we use our parents like recurring dreams, to be entered into when needed. They are always there for love or hate.’ She has described her father as ‘not living in the real world’ and her mother as ‘brave and resourceful’ but her sympathies clearly lie with her father. Her parents have made their mark on her work, not only in her characterisation of them in her novels, but also in that the clash of their personalities seems to have been a motivating force behind her compulsion to become a writer in the first place. As Lorna Sage points out, the roles of Doris Lessing’s parents echo those of Olive Schreiner, a writer she greatly admired. In an Afterword to Olive Schreiner’s novel The Story of An African Farm (1885) Doris Lessing writes:

To the creation of a woman novelist seem to go certain psychological ingredients; at least, often enough to make it interesting. One of them, a balance between father and mother where the practicality, the ordinary sense, cleverness, and worldly ambition is on the side of the mother; and the father’s life is so weighted with dreams and ideas and imaginings that their joint life gets lost in what looks like a hopeless muddle and failure, but which holds a potentiality for something that must be recognized as better, on a different level, than what ordinary sense or cleverness can begin to conceive.

This ‘potentiality’ was not realised by Doris Lessing’s parents, but is somehow taken on by her. It is as if their poverty, their unconventionality, their resigned irritation with their lot, acted as an abrasive stimulus for their daughter to continue the