RECONSTRUCTING MOTHER – DAUGHTER SUBJECTIVITIES THROUGH WRITING IN DORIS LESSING'S UNDER MY SKIN

ANCA GEORGESCU
'Valahia' University of Targoviste

*Abstract***:** This paper is focused on the traumatic experience of matrophobia, as informed by the feminist critic Nancy Chodorow and depicted by Doris Lessing in two of her autobiographical writings: Under My Skin and Walking in the Shade. I will demonstrate that autobiography writing provides Lessing with a means to explore and understand her matrophobia, and to create a sense of self out of her difficult relationship with her mother.

Key- words: matrophobia, autobiography, subjectivity, self, motherhood.

As Nancy Chodorow argues, women 'define and experience themselves relationally, especially in relation to mother issues' (207). In her autobiography, Lessing aims to untangle her difficult relation with her mother. She defines her subjectivity primarily through that relationship, no matter how negative or damaging it is. The narrator struggles to forge a self devoid of relational identity which some feminists, including Chodorow, claim to be fundamental to women's subjectivity. The narrator views the relational identity as stultifying for her creativity; she is aware from a young age that, to be able to carry out her ambition of becoming a writer, she has to defy the generated role of mothering and motherhood subscribed to by the white women in settler colonies. The fear of falling into these relational identities sets Lessing in perpetual flight from her mother and everything she stands for. The fear of her agency, subjectivity and autonomy being effaced and annihilated by her domineering mother is as intense as a trauma. This traumatic relationship foregrounds Lessing's fear of becoming her mother – a condition Lynn Sukenick calls mathrophobia (cited in Rich, *Woman Born* 235). Matrophobia, as Adrienne Rich explains:

> Can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mother's; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (*Woman Born* 236)

From the beginning of *Under My Skin*, Lessing intensely rejects any kind of identification with her mother. We hear the narrated 'I' of Lessing as a small child repeating 'her (Maude Tayler's) so frequent *You are just like me* made me white –hot rage", even when it came to having a good memory like mother (Lessing, *Under My Skin* 150). Later on, becoming a mother, feeling split and invisible, Lessing 'switches off' (Lessing, *Under My Skin* 262) her maternal affections to protect her sense of self. She abandons her children out of fear of becoming her mother:

> I explained to them (her children) that they would understand later why I had left… I carried, like a defective genre, a kind of doom or fatality, which would trap them as it had me, if I stayed. Leaving I would break some ancient chain of repetition… This feeling of doom, of fatality… was what had made me, and from my earliest childhood, repeat and repeat, 'I will *not*, simply will not'. And yet I had been swept along on some surface, or public, wave ever since I had left the

BDD-A20416 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:33 UTC)

> farm (and my typewriter) taking my fate in my hands, or so I thought, to become one of the town's marriageable girls, then wife, then mother. (Lessing, *Under My Skin* 262)

Viewing her controlling mother as destructive of her individuality and creativity makes Lessing fear being destructive towards her own children. As a creative young woman writer, Lessing experiences a conflict between maternal feeling and her self- preservation. She is afraid to repeat her mother's destiny, stuck with domesticity. Lessing rages at her mother for having accepted her situation. As Rich writes, 'a mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman' (*Woman Born* 243). She is afraid of repeating what she most hated in her mother: 'her pressure, her insistence, her close jealous supervision, her curiosity – all the pathetic identification of woman whose gratification is only in her children' (Lessing, *Under My Skin* 112). To break through this vicious cycle, Lessing saves herself by abandoning her children and husband. She might trigger anger in her children, but she will be spared their pity. It is ironic that she repeats the risk of becoming her mother entering another marriage and having another child.

Lessing's sense of anger and pity towards her mother is the result of her mother's feelings of victimization in the institution of motherhood. Her mother complains to neighbours that her children 'brought her low and sapped her, how all her own talents were withering unused, how the little girl in particular… made her life a total misery… And I was a cold flame of hatred for her' (Lessing, *Under My Skin* 30). When Maude Tayler, stick with life in Southern Rhodesia, seeks her children's sympathy, Lessing recalls her summoning her and her brother 'several times s day… to the bedside where she said dramatically, 'Poor mummy, poor sick mummy…' As for me I was consumed with flames of rage' (*Under My Skin* 65). Lessing still pities her because she could not possibly change being a victim –she felt trapped in Africa and could not return to Britain. What Lessing looked for was a powerful mother who would not identify with patriarchy in motherhood. As Rich states:

> the daughter's rage at her mother is more likely to arise from her mother having relegated her to second-class status, while looking to the son (or father) for the fulfilment of her own thwarted needs… A daughter can feel rage at her mother's powerlessness or lack of struggle – because of her intense identification and because in order to fight for herself she needs to have been both loved and fought for. (*Woman Born* 244)

Maude Tayler's despair in giving birth to a girl after a long and difficult labour, and her preference for Harry over Doris, emotionally distances her daughter from an early age. In an afternoon on the African farm, Lessing remembers how her plea for her mother to cuddle her becomes a family joke, while Harry gets all her attention and affection. Lessing's childhood memories in the first volume of autobiography are full of instances of this kind.

Lessing's uses childhood experiences such as these as impetus for self – investigation and examination of her relationship with her mother. In Rhodesia, Lessing escapes from the stultifying home environment and her controlling mother in adolescence. She resents her mother's affection, something she does not think she gets or needs. As Lessing views it, the reason for her passionate feelings of rejection towards her parents, particularly her mother, is her being sent away to boarding school at the early age of six (*Under My Skin* 418-9). It is interesting to note that Lessing repeats some of her mother's parenting styles when she becomes a mother, including following a four-hourly

BDD-A20416 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:33 UTC)

feeding plan and sending her son to boarding school. Looking back at her own mothering, the older narrating 'I' views a resemblance between the narrated 'I' and the young motherhood of Maude Tayler. The changing sense of self of the narrator makes it possible to acknowledge becoming her mother in some ways that would have shocked her at the time. It is clear that Lessing's animosity towards her mother lies in her maternal family backgrounds.

Under My Skin begins with Lessing's mother's recollections of her own mother: 'She was very pretty but all she cared about was horses and dancing'. (*Under My Skin* 1) Though Maude Tayler lost her mother at age three, she resented her deeply. Her resentment to her mother, Emily, was the result of her father John William McVeagh's upward social position. As he worked his way up to the middle class from a clerk to a bank manager in London, McVeagh was deeply conscious of his status and disapproved of his wife's working class habits and tastes. This disapproval manifested in the total disappearance of Emily in the lives of his children after her death, symbolized by the lack of a single photo of Emily and her immediate replacement with a new wife. This disapproval was also transmitted to his first child Lessing's mother, Emily Maude, who was named after her mother but later dropped 'Emily' for her name. Maude resented her mother for being common, and was so committed to the idea of being middle class that she had a breakdown for fear of becoming her mother in the relative poverty of her life in Africa. Nevertheless, Maude tried to hold on to the idea of superior race and class to the end of her life. She hated everything Lessing wrote against racism and class inequality. Matrophobia is a legacy which runs in the family and when Lessing leaves her daughter, it is to avoid transferring it to her. As Nancy Chodorow states:

> come to have their own independent psychological reality. A mother's regression Both the form (primary identification, primary love, and so forth) and the content of a mother's mutual relation with her infant grow out of her early experience. Her mothering experience and expectations are informed (for the most part unconsciously) by her own childhood history, and her current and past relationship, both external and internal, to her own natal family. This history and these relationships have over the course of her development to early relational stances in the course of mothering activates these early constituted internal object-relationships, defences, and conflicts. (28, 29)

Lessing's own motherhood is in most cases determined by her early childhood experience. Lessing suggests that one of the reasons for writing autobiography is because 'women often get dropped from memory and then history' (*Under My Skin* 12). Autobiography is also a way of keeping some control over how one is represented as a writer, for, as a celebrated author, Lessing's stories have been used as 'pegs to hang people's fantasies on' (*Under My Skin* 14). Lessing publishes her life narrative to claim ownership of her life and in order to tell her own truths – although, 'truth' in memory is always subjective as events are selected and variously interpreted at different points. It is ironic that, a few years after her autobiography was published, an American biographer gives her own account of Lessing's life which Lessing rejects, but she admits that as a writer and public figure, she cannot own her life.

Despite this, Lessing's life-writing provides her with a subjective method of dealing with her difficult relation with her mother and its effect on her life. Early in both volumes, Lessing sets this as a focal point of her writing: 'there are aspects of my life I am always trying to understand better… including my relation with my mother'. (*Under My Skin* 15) Autobiography provides her with an opportunity to retrospectively explore the maternal relationship: 'What I did not know was how to define myself… There was a

BDD-A20416 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:33 UTC)

hiatus, a lack, a blur – and it was to do with parents and particularly with my mother' (Lessing, *Under My Skin* 16).

In her seventies, Lessing is still perplexed about her resentment towards her mother. She writes: 'I had fought her steadily, relentlessly, and I had had to – but what was it all about? Why? And I was not able to answer that, entirely, until I was in my seventies, and even then perhaps not finally' (Lessing, *Walking* 16). It is through painful remembering of the past – memory having a focal role in autobiography, which distinguishes it from the similar self-representation in fiction – that Lessing comes to realize that the lack of career for her mother, and by extension for the women of her generation, was the foundation of her over identification with her children.

Lessing reconstructs her past through her parents: 'We use our parents like recurring themes, to be entered into when needed; they are always there for love or hate' (*My Father* 83). But she is particularly obsessed with her mother, who re-emerge in the different characters of Mrs. Quest in *Martha Quest*, Jane Somers in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, and Maudie Fowler in *Under My Skin*, among others. Autobiography provides Lessing with a means to explore and understand her matrophobia, and to create a sense of self out of her difficult relationship with her mother. She realizes that 'for years I lived in a state of accusation against my mother, at first hot, then cold, and hard, and the pain, not to say anguish, was deep and genuine. But now I ask myself, against what expectations, what promises, was I matching what actually happened?' (Lessing, *Under My Skin* 15) I believe Lessing as a daughter was holding on to mythical expectations about mothers that they are to be blamed for everything that goes wrong in the daughter's life. I suggest that, for Lessing, one of the primary motivations for writing autobiographically is the attempt to understand this relation and how it relates to her professional life as a writer, and her private life as a wife, mother and lover.

Autobiography provides a medium through which Lessing might understand her mother's life more empathically, from the perspective of an aged woman. In this way, Lessing writes out of her 'matrophobia' using various autobiographical 'I's. The radical change from a rebellious self, intense hatred and furious feelings towards her mother in volume one, is set alongside dispassionate analyses of her past self and breaking of the silent and cold relationship between mother and daughter, through setting up a dialogue between her mother and herself and making of new subjectivities for her mother and herself. This is something that she could not acknowledge in actual life. The reason for this incapacity in her mother's presence lies in the daughter culturally and historically constructed narrated 'I', that believes in the myth about mothers being valued as mothers only, and ignoring her mother's subjectivity as a woman. As de Kanter argues, differentiation between mother and woman are the two positions of Law of the Mother which daughters should acknowledge (31). In Lessing's autobiography, it takes the narrator/writer 'I' to create and understand her mother as a separate woman. The daughter as a writing subject is capable of placing Maude Tayler 'in the social, historical, sexual, racial and ethnic, economic and political context of her life cycle'. (de Kanter 31)

Through autobiography, Lessing understands her mother, but only after her death. As she states, 'you have to be grownup, really grown up, not merely in years, to understand your parents'. (Lessing, *Walking* 159) She acknowledges that it took her a longer time to appreciate that her mother

> was the girl who had defied her father to become a nurse, standing up to years of his refusal even to speak to her. This was the woman who impressed everyone she met by her vigour, her competence, her independence, her humour. I cannot

BDD-A20416 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:33 UTC)

> imagine that, had I met the young Emily Maude McVeagh, I would have much to say to her, but I would have had to admire her (Lessing, *Walking* 160)

Lessing continues:

> I think what happened was this: When she arrived on that farm… when she knew that this would be her future, a lonely one, because of her neighbours, with whom she had nothing in common; when she knew that the forward drive of her life which had been towards some form of conventional middle- class living, was blocked; when she knew her husband was an invalid and would not be able to keep his grasp on life… then she had a breakdown and took to her bed. (*Walking* 160-1)

What causes this change of perspective? Is it merely the passing of time? Or is it the image of the mother haunting the daughter after her death, making her rethink antagonistic relationship to her? Or is it due to Lessing's renewed attempt to resolve their conflictual relationship from a mature perspective? One reason might be that the Lessing who once believed that 'passionate polemics about art or anything else are always a sign of health', has changed into the Lessing who now argues for the ideal of 'dispassion' as a goal, as a way of 'comparative tolerance'(Lessing, Against Utopia 2). The Lessing who was once passionately 'in nervous flight from her [mother]', who 'set myself obdurately against her in a kind of inner emigration from everything she represented', (*Under My Skin* 15) and who 'would have plunged… into frightful insecurity' were she to think and write about her mother (Lessing, *Under My Skin* 13), now feels capable of retrieving the memories of her mother. Appreciation and understanding have replaced passionate resentment and reactive beliefs.

Lessing's mother's death plays on her conscience. Chastising herself, Lessing writes, 'If you had let her live with you she should not have died' (*Walking* 223). Immersed in thoughts of her mother, she thinks that she will never forget the memory of her; her death for Lessing is like 'bruises, spreading darkly, out of sight, not ever really fading'. (Lessing, *Walking* 223) She interrogates herself, 'At what point during this long miserable story of my mother and myself could I have behaved differently? Done differently?' (Lessing, *Walking* 223)

Lessing imagines that, had her mother still been in her life during the process of writing her autobiographies, 'would share some kind of humorous comprehension… of the sheer demanded awfulness of life' (*Walking* 224). This indicates that the daughter is finally empowered to acknowledge the mother's situated position as an individual and by extension, at least in fantasy, both mother and daughter recognize each other's different subjectivity. As a result, Lessing is able to pin down the root of her mother's problem and give her mother what she lacked: to mother her mother who has never been mothered by anyone. As Lessing states, 'I would simply put my arms around her… Around who? Little Emily, whose mother died when she was three, leaving her to the servants, a cold unloving stepmother, a cold dutiful father'. (*Walking* 224)

Scripting autobiography is not only therapeutic for Lessing's pain and anger; it also functions as a medium through which Lessing immortalizes the memory of her mother and creates new selfhood for the mother and daughter. Since, as she has repeated over time, she writes to find out what she thinks. Writing autobiography does exactly this for Lessing in thinking and reconstructing her relation to the mother. The daughter-writer has written her mother and herself into subjectivity. She discovers that she views her mother as an efficient, energetic, intelligent and creative woman in spite of being trapped in her situation. Finally, autobiography takes her back to her own self; to her place in the

BDD-A20416 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:33 UTC)

tree of her family from which she had been in a life-long flight. The door of communication was forced open.

Lessing's authorship and creativity are shaped by the specific time and space which affected her relationship with her mother. As a result, she was emotionally and physically separated from her mother throughout her life. In her autobiography, however, Lessing is textually united with her mother.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. CHODOROW, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkekey: U of California P, 1978.
2. DE KANTER, Ruth. *Daughtering and Mothering*, London: Routledge, 1993.
3. LESSING, Doris. 'Against Utopia', Interview with Susie Linfield. Salmagundi. 130/131 (2001): 59-79.
4. ---- 'My Father'. *A Small Personal Voice: Essay, Reviews, Interviews*, Ed. Paul Schlueter. New York: Vintage, 1975. 83-93.
5. ---- *Under My Skin*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.
6. ---- *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autography 1949-1962*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1997.
7. RICH, Adrienne, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1995.
8. ROSNER, Victoria, 'Home Fires: Doris Lessing, Colonial Architecture and the Reproduction of Mothering', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 18.1 (Spring 1999): 59-89.
9. SMITH Sidonie and Julia Watson, ed. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.
10. SUKENICK, Lynn, 'Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction', Doris Lessing: Critical Studies, Ed. Annis Pratt and L.S. Dembo. Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1974.

BDD-A20416 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:33 UTC)