“Born Out of My Ownself”: (Re)claiming the Self in Doris Lessing’s *Under My Skin, Volume 1, 1919-1949*

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Summary

This paper seeks to explore how self-identity is (re)constructed through the narrative act of autobiography in Doris Lessing’s *Under My Skin, Volume 1, 1919-1949* (1995). The paper argues that the authentic self is born in the process of narrative writing and that the self coexists with other selves that are a result of socialisation. It also seeks to interrogate how this process of identity formation is realised through the prisms of memory, history, culture and social environment and the unconscious self. The fluid or provisional nature of identity, and the subjective nature of the above factors will be critically examined in an attempt to better understand the nature of life narratives in the broad scope of literary study.

Opsomming

Hierdie verhandeling poog om die (re)konstruksie van selfidentiteit deur die outobiografie as narratiewe handeling te ondersoek aan die hand van *Under My Skin, Volume 1, 1919-1949* (1995). Daar word aangevoer dat die ware self uit die narratiewe skryfproses gebore word, en dat die self en die ander selwe wat uit sosialisering voortgespruit het, naas mekaar bestaan. Daar word ook ondersoek ingestel na die vorming van identiteit deur die prismas van geheue, geskiedenis, kultuur, sosiale omgewing en die onbewuste self. Die veranderlike of voorlopige aard van identiteit en die subjektiewe aard van die bogenoemde faktore word krities ondersoek om 'n beter begrip te vorm van die aard van lewensnarratiewe binne die groter bestek van literatuurstudie.

Introduction

Doris Lessing’s *Under My Skin* (1995) is an autobiographical text that, true to its genre, attempts to mark the identity indices of its subject, not only from time of birth, but from genealogical roots up to age thirty. The text delves two generations into the narrator’s ancestry before it focuses on her birth and early childhood. It further explores the development of the

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narrator's identity through adolescence and early adulthood within the contexts of the family, settler community and the colonial environment in general. The narrative also critically explores the responses of the subject narrator to the various influences from those people in her life, the ideologies of her day, literary consciousness and the effect of the two World Wars. These are critical factors in the construction of the narrator's self-identity.

The thrust of this present endeavour is to critically examine how the identity of the self is constructed both in temporal and spatial terms as revealed in this life narrative. The main objective is to critically examine the state of flux that is engendered upon the self in time and through time, and in different environments, by the various experiences that the narrator goes through. This is a particularly intriguing project as the volume under analysis covers the first twenty-nine years of Doris Lessing's life, and in spatial terms involves movements from England to Persia (now Iran), then back to England, to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and back to England. In between these major sojourns are trips to Cape Town, South Africa. Self-identity is always in the making, and how the self is negotiated and constructed in diverse cultural and geopolitical environments over a period of three decades calls for close scrutiny. Such a scrutiny of necessity must preoccupy itself with the critical question of agency, that is, how the subject of these experiences author and authorise her lived reality and self-identity. Lived experiences are subject to different interpretations at different times and in different contexts.

The genre of autobiography, which is a product of retrospection, involves construction and reconstruction of lived experience by the individual who is the subject of the narrative. In doing so the individual subject will be constructing a certain projection of the self out of the many possible "selves" that can be drawn out of those lived experiences. This is an ongoing process that involves the subject's responses to her own life at different times and in different contexts. Giddens (1991: 5) makes a succinct point when he contends that the "reflexive project of the self … consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised (auto)biographical narratives". He also adds that this process of constructing the self takes place "in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems" (1991: 5). The point being made here is that lived experience is mediated in various ways and the subject individual can understand, respond to, interpret and construct or reconstruct their self-identity out of the available possibilities. This point also invites the problematic of how to read autobiography given the fact that the genre is fraught with questions about the nature of truth, and the place of memory and history in life narratives.

Under My Skin as a Reflexive Project

The autobiographical act in the first place should be read as an act of defying narratives about "the self" as given by those who are around the individual. It also strives for a presentation of the self that can experience life differently from the general perspectives that are fostered by society at large. Lessing declares this wish to give voice to the personal experience as distinct from those experiences shaped and shared by society. She intones:

> In this book, I have been presented – I have presented myself – as a product of all those McVeaghs, Flowers, Taylors, Batleys, Millers, Snewins and Cornishes, sound and satisfactory English, Scottish, Irish compost, nurtured by Kent, Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Devon and Somerset. I am slotted into place, a little item on a tree of descent. But this is not how I experienced my life then.
>
> (Lessing 1995: 419)[1]

The import of this statement is that the self can experience life differently, in other words refuse to be just a product of society. The life narrative thus becomes a rendition of the reality of experience as lived, interpreted and constructed by the individual subject involved. This is the argument that Giddens (1991: 52) presents when he proffers that the "the identity of the self, in contrast to the self as a generic phenomenon, presumes reflexive awareness". It often involves alienating oneself from culturally, historically and socially imposed definitions of the self so as to give an own definition of the self. To use Weintraub's (1978: 1) argument, in this volume, Lessing is a "self reflective person" asking "who am I?" and "how did I become what I am?". This process puts the self at the centre, not as the object of definition, but as the subject who is in authority, in control of an own destiny. The self is the subject that presides over its own creation, over its own birth, though not in contradistinction to the other selves imposed by society.

Lessing embarks on this autobiographical act with a clear objective and thus declares that "writing an autobiography is an act of claiming one's own life" (p. 14), and at the end of the life narrative she is able to declare with some relief that "I was born out of my own self – so I felt" (p. 419). Even the title to this volume, *Under my Skin*, calls into being an inner identity, an inner self that inhabits a space that is beyond, and yet inclusive of, the public definition. The title is a declaration of the "I" preserved under the skin. This declaration comes within the context of an awareness that society, or the public, is a very much interested stakeholder in defining the individual self, and would even want to appropriate and subordinate this

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1. All subsequent references to *Under My Skin* will be indicated by page number(s) only.

individual self into its societal identity structures. Thus the autobiographical act becomes a contention that the self is a private space (under my skin) that should be wrestled from the public domain and reflexively be given meaning, interpretation and definition by the subject herself. This line of thought is supported by the argument that "human beings are agents of or actors in their own lives, rather than passive pawns in social games or unconscious transmitters of cultural scripts and models of identity" (Smith & Watson 2001: 42). Giddens (1991: 2) also avers that the self is not a passive entity determined by external influences.

Lessing's project to reflexively give birth to a self-identity through the autobiographical act is, however, not free from attendant problems. This is particularly so as self-identity is always in a flux. Self-identity cannot be defined in essential terms because of its fluidity or provisional nature. Smith and Watson posit that "[b]ecause of [the] constant placement and displacement of who we are, we can think of identities as multiple and as contextual, contested and contingent" (p. 33). This means that in reading Lessing's autobiography, one must approach it with a preparedness to be confronted by, and to confront, the multiple selves of the autobiographer. These identities are thrust by various factors such as Lessing's English middle-class background, colonial/imperial ethos, literary consciousness, ideological leanings and the dictates of the writer's inner sense of personal fulfilment and justice. The conception of this identity-formation process should come within the context of lived experience over time and the geo-cultural influences of Lessing's early years in Persia and later years as a colonial in Rhodesia.

Recovering the Self through the Prism of Memory

A challenge for any scholar of autobiography derives from the question to what extent we can verify the facts and events in the subject narrator's life. Put in simpler terms, is the autobiographer confined to clinical, objective truth in the act of reconstructing the self? One is also bound to ask what is truth anyway? Lessing embarks on her life-narrative project with full awareness of this problem. Thus she warns that "you cannot sit down to write about yourself without rhetorical questions of the most tedious kind demanding attention. Our friend, the Truth, is the first" (p. 11). We should also bear in mind that truth by its nature is relative, that what is true in one context and at some particular point in time cannot remain so in different circumstances and times. The notion of objective truth thus remains problematic, even if only elusive, when applied to autobiography, a genre that deals with a concept as volatile as self-identity. Lessing is clearly aware of this fact as she partakes of the search for self-identity, thus she

declares that "the main reason, the real one, why autobiography must be untrue is the subjective experience of time" (p. 109).

In the (re)construction of the self, Levin and Taitz (in Veit-Wild & Chennells 1999: 165) have some useful insights. They posit that "what happens, how it is remembered and recorded is dependent on the writer's particular point of view at a particular time". Lessing herself is in agreement with this view as she states that "[t]elling 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" (p. 12). Giddens (1991: 72) is even more forthright when he underscores the fact that, in any case, "the autobiography is a corrective intervention into the past, not merely a chronicle of elapsed events". Gusdorf (in Olney 1980: 36) even warns that "one should not take the narrator's word for it, but should consider his[/her] version of the facts as one contribution to his[/her] own biography". This means that truth in autobiography is as experienced and interpreted by the subject who is telling her/his life story.

Life experiences are revisited through memory, and this is a selective process undertaken from the vantage point of retrospection. Autobiography depends on memory as a meaning-making process. Yet this meaning-making process, as Smith and Watson (2001: 16) argue, is not a "passive act of retrieval from some memory bank". It is a process that involves what Lessing refers to as "peering into the past" (p. 12) (remembering), and interpreting or reinterpreting experience so as to give it meaning and relevance to the present and future. This past is said to be like "the little blobs of colour [on a glass pane] that move all the time because the sun is moving outside" (p. 13). Taitz and Levin (in Veit-Wild & Chenells 1999: 169) concur that in autobiography "materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness".

In essence therefore, objectivity in autobiography has to be redefined to include the reflexive responses of the subject to own experience, to include those interpretations that are made in later life. The definition should also include acts of conscious forgetting of events, experiences and facts that do not strike a harmony with the desired projection of the self. Lessing openly admits that in the (re)construction of the past and/or the self, how much or how little truth to tell, is "the first problem of the self chronicler", and she does not "believe it is the duty of friends, lovers, [and] comrades to tell all" (p. 11) about their life experiences. The exercise is a complex one because the self is not just there to be retrieved; it has to be constructed, just as in the same way the past is not there but has to be constructed. Lessing confesses to so many omissions, memory blanks, and at times reluctance to delve into certain specific experiences, as memory is reordered, rearranged to project a certain image of the self. She also confesses to facing the difficulty of reconciling the events of "child time and adult time" (p. 59) and also to

“trying hard to make sense of my life through a strict use of memory” when a “whole tract of time had disappeared” (p. 60). This critical nature of memory as a meaning-making process is well underscored, and Lessing admits that “we can make up our past … can actually watch our mind doing it, taking a little fragment of fact and then spinning a tale out of it” (p. 13). The emphasis here is on the selective mechanism through which the past, experience and the self are constructed and born through memory.

Deploying the Id in the Search of the Authentic “I”

Lessing’s point of departure in the search of the unalloyed self is marked by an exploration of her past. She begins by delving into the depth of her ancestry, capturing its mixed fortunes. Within the narrative of the ancestry one gets the notion of an attempt to access a raw form of the self. It is an attempt to retrieve the unconscious self that has not been predetermined or proscribed by social expectations. The id, or the unconscious self, has got its needs and informs the birth of an authentic “I” in later years. In Lessing it enables the rebellion against the suffocating and imprisoning English middle-class culture and the narrow-minded imperial attitudes. The idea of England and its empire evoked a sense of special duty in which England was the exemplar to a significant population in Lessing’s time. Yet it evoked a different feeling in her as evidenced by her assertion that “all my life I have been the child who says the Emperor is naked” (p. 17). England was supposed to represent the best in terms of civil and natural endowments, yet Lessing is driven asunder by this idea, and shows that she shared nothing of this esprit de corps. She even protests: “That England they talked about, all that green grass and spring flowers and cows as friendly as cats – what had all that to do with me?” (p. 82).

In later years, the self that emerges is in reaction to colonialism that straitjacketed the colonial in imperial etiquette and middle-class culture away from home. For Lessing, to subscribe to the notion of England’s special destiny in the imperial project was also to recognise her colonial enterprise. This in turn also meant buying into the colonial logic as expressed in such critical policies as the Colour Bar, the Native Question and the superiority of White civilisation. She thus confides that in rebelling against the colonial scheme and its expectations on the settler, she was beginning to develop a “vague but strong feeling that there was something terribly wrong with the system” (p. 179). She could not understand why blacks were so negatively stereotyped in the Rhodesian press (p. 283), and why they were so overworked for so little pay on settler farms (p. 179). She begins to ask the question: Who am I beyond living the official imperial attitudes, the social expectation, and enduring the “terrible snobbery of the time?” (p. 33).

Lessing in this autobiography is saying that, being born in the family that she was, and in early-twentieth-century England, meant that survival of the unalloyed self was severely constricted. This English society, as evidenced by the narrator's mother fussing about middle-class standards, preoccupied itself with moulding the identity of the self to the point of suffocating the "I" who should be at the centre of existence. To bring this "I" to the fore, one therefore needs to go to the beginnings and retrieve the unconscious self who has not been influenced by the family, society or the state. This is what Pattison (in Veit-Wild & Chennells 1999: 197) refers to as the primordial "I", "a self gained prior to that gained by identification with the other". This unconscious self becomes the basis for the construction of the "I" that extricates itself from the culturally and socially moulded self.

This reading of *Under My Skin* reveals how the unconscious self begins to act in contra-action to distance itself from the "self" created by cultural and colonial attitudes in the narrator. The unconscious self begins to seek expression in ways that run contrary to the generally accepted norms in Lessing's society. The first manifestation is seen in her experimentation with literary consciousness and writing which begins to interrogate assumptions of white civilisation and commonly accepted attitudes towards natives. The second manifestation is evidenced in Lessing's flirting with the communist ideology in which she and her comrades began to regard white civilisation as belonging to the "dustbin of history" (p. 261). This process ushers in a new identity of the self that gropes for space to experience life differently from settler social expectations. It is clearly so as the reconstructed narrative of the self amounts to a criticism of the family values and aspirations, the society's pressures on the individual as well as the implications of the imperial grand project on the colonial.

Instead the new self begins to toy with the possibility of a new world, a new consciousness, new "lovely and loving societies" into which it begins to "fit black people, particularly black children" (p. 15). This is a remarkable departure from and rejection of the colonial mindset where the native is pushed to the periphery, and where the colonial is expected to be held enthralled by settler myths and ideology. Lessing looks into her past and admits that early childhood made her "one of the walking wounded" (p. 25) because of interventions from adults around her, and the predominant ideas of her time that made it impossible for this "I" to thrive. The father's experiences invoke the World War memories that capture humanity as caught up in its bigoted folly and to which it has no solution. On the other hand, the mother is uncritically fascinated with a middle-class culture that leaves no space for the personal growth of the narrator.

The situation leads to alienation of the narrator from both parents and the colonial attitudes of the settlers. This represents, as argued by Taitz and Levin (in Veit-Wild and Chennels 1999: 169), a rebellion against all "societal institutions that are represented as being responsible for endowing

one with a primary sense of identity, a sense of wholeness". This situation also haunts the narrator with the urgent need to define who she is, to be the midwife who superintends over the birth of a self that is distinct from those imposed by people around her. The midwifery role comes through the autobiographical narrative act, through which the narrator reflexively declares that "clearly I had to fight to establish a reality of my own, against the insistence from the adults that I should accept theirs" (p. 13). By embarking on an autobiographical act to create a self-identity, Lessing is refusing to be cocooned by colonial dogma, creed and cultural expectations of her time. She boldly states that through the autobiographical act she was simply "rejecting the human condition, which is to be trapped by circumstances" (p. 120). Autobiography is thus "an attempt to produce and determine [a new] life" (Taitz & Levin in Veit-Wild & Chennells 1999: 164). Self-identity is thus constructed and formed in the process of writing.

And yet the construction of a self-identity and the negotiation for a space for the personal "I" in the context of society is not without its challenges. The personal "I" often has to coexist with other "selves" that are created or expected by society. For Lessing, allowing for this coexistence becomes a survival strategy, a protective bunker for the inner self "under [the] skin". The evolution of the authentic "I" is strategically allowed to blossom alongside other selves. There are two prominent other selves to Lessing's personality, namely the Hostess personality and the Tigger character, which are both versions of the narrator. These two versions of the narrator's character are meant to conform to societal expectations while at the same time protecting the questioning, groping and critical inner self that is budding. Of the Hostess personality, the narrator says: "The Hostess personality, bright, helpful, attentive, receptive to what is expected, is very strong indeed. It is a protection, a shield for the private self" (p. 20). This private self is also defined as the "me, I, this feeling of me". The critical point here is that negotiating for self-identity is a give-and-take exercise that allows for both alienation and integration of the "I".

A typical case in point is when Lessing attempts to recreate her birth circumstances to friends under the influence of mescalin, a drug that causes hallucinations. In this excitement, yet still in control, the Hostess personality takes charge in what Lessing refers to as "giving myself a good birth" (p. 21). The experimentation with mescalin allows for the creation of a new reality, a new birth, and also makes possible the writing of the "tactile and sensuous subjective experience of a child" (p. 32). The circumstances of this new birth are different from the received truth, but nevertheless important in the effort to conceptualise a new identity. This is an instance of wrestling the new self from the agreed circumstances of her birth. It is a process of partial alienation. Complete alienation of the "I" is not possible and is as detrimental as complete submersion of the same "I" in the societal structures. And yet the private "I" often works to subvert the public expectation, as the narrator subtly hints: "Behind [the Hostess Personality] all that

friendly helpfulness was something else, the observer, and it is here I retreat to take refuge when I think that my life will be public property and there is nothing I can do about it" (p. 20).

The preservation of the self "under my skin" is further pursued through the Tigger character. Tigger is initially conceived of as a literary character in an artistic project in which all the narrator's family members are characters. The narrator herself was the "fat and bouncy Tigger", and later on it remained as a nickname for Lessing, hence at various stages of her life she became known as Tigger Taylor, Tigger Wisdom, Tigger Lessing and also Comrade Tigger. This artistic creation is yet another testimony of the inner self trying to give birth to other selves that would coexist with it. It is important to understand the fact that the Tigger character is actually an expression, an aspect of the Hostess personality. Of this character Lessing says: "This personality was expected to be brash, jokey, clumsy and always ready to be a good sport, that is to laugh at himself, apologize, clown, confess inability. An extrovert ... it was a protection for the person I really was" (p. 89). The outward-looking and receptive character is nothing less than a public relations figure that is in ready conformity with societal expectations. Lessing admits that "we the human kind … respond to what is expected of us" (p. 217). It is also important to note that there is no contradiction in the coexistence of these identities. They actually compliment, or even more, allow for the creation of a critical space where the authentic "I" can thrive. Depending on context, the authentic "I" can fulfil the social expectations through the Hostess or Tigger personalities, and can also withdraw into its inner space to explore its potentials, possibilities, aspirations and sensibilities. This also points out humankind's capacity to have multiple selves. The autobiographical act therefore explores these multiple selves while at the same time it attempts to disentangle the inner, private self from these other selves.

On the overall, it is the Hostess personality and the Tigger character that enabled Lessing to weather through the narrow and mean social outlook of white middle-class expectations, the spiritual sterility of the Convent, the bigotry of colonial settler ethos and the hypocrisy and practical inadequacies of communism. This pseudo-conformity offered by a duality of the self protects the renegade inner self that is critical of, even early in life, antiquated and proscriptive ways of raising children, oppressive spiritual dogmas represented by the Convent, the racial bigotry of Rhodesian settlers, class and social pretensions among the settlers and the hypocrisy of white civilisation.

Confirming the Birth of the Real Self

The real self that is constructed in retrospect cuts out its identity by juxtaposing itself the core structures of society. The very first sketches of this identity are drawn in relation to the family. The narrator's family is seen as a victim of circumstances of their own time, most notably World War 1 and their aspirations to social status. Lessing's parents are prisoners of their generation and time and therefore cannot be in a position to allow for the cultivation and fulfilment of the narrator's individual self. The mother is seen as constricting and from early in life, Lessing declares: "I was in nervous flight from her ever since I can remember anything and from the age fourteen I set myself against her in a kind of inner emigration from anything she represented" (p. 15). The mother stood for a somewhat unquestioning allegiance to notions of middle-class culture; how tables are set, what society to keep and having nothing to do with the vulgarity of white common society. The narrator at some point confesses that her mother was "unhappy because her immediate neighbours were not from the English middle class" (p. 58). A semblance of this pretension to higher life had been observed during the Persian years when her husband worked for the Imperial Bank of Persia, and the same was evident as the family headed for Africa. The narrator observes that "[g]oing to Persia she had taken all the necessities for a middle-class life. Coming to Africa she had clothes for making calls and for entertaining, visiting cards, gloves, scarves, hats and feather fans" (p. 59). But the sojourn in Rhodesia proved quite a challenge. Even as she came to Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Lessing's mother still dreamt of a life of picnics, musical evenings, tea parties and dinner parties, and "never had any intention of giving up the family's status as middle class" (p. 59). This pattern is well captured in the character Mary Turner in Lessing's novel, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950). She even expected her children to do better and fulfil her ambitions.

What Lessing is at odds with is, given the circumstances in the colony, the pretence of English middle-class life amidst grinding poverty and squalor that characterised settler life on the farm. She is asking whether settler farmers in Rhodesia were "still middle class people, 'nice people'"? (p. 58). She concedes to the reality that her crippled father "would not be able to dominate the bush and that they will never make the fortunes promised by the exhibition" (p. 59) back home in London. Beyond the family, the young Lessing defined herself as apart from this white settler society who proved reluctant to admit that "whites in British Southern Rhodesia ever lived so low and so fearfully" (p. 65). She developed a consciousness of the inner self that detested the settler attitudes towards blacks and what white settler civilisation stood for in the colony. She could not subscribe to the beliefs and myths of this settler nation that would not accept that the "land belonged to the blacks", but would hypocritically propagate the myth that the "British empire was a boon and benefit to the whole world" (p. 50).

The emerging inner "self" of the narrator is characterised by a liberal critical spirit that yearns for a more fulfilling existence devoid of artificial barriers of a racial and class nature. It sets the narrator on an identity search that clashes not only with the family but with the settler society and state. Her liberal tolerance of blacks and subscribing to communist ideas is seen as inimical to white interests and a great betrayal by one of their own. Yet, she felt so much at odds with this society and its social system that she confesses thus: "I found myself unable to keep quiet about what I thought. It was known I had all these dangerous ideas …" (p. 244). This inevitably led to Lessing's being banished from Rhodesia for being a communist. What is critical in this development is the conscious determination with which the inner core of the self, the sense of being oneself, is preserved from these outside pressures. It is not only the political pressures of the settler state that fail to break the spirit of the self. Even the subtle pressures of the marriage institution fail to clip the wings of the liberal spirit that continued to grope for a fulfilling existence. The narrator, as is argued by Gusdorf (in Olney 1980: 34) assumes "the task of bringing out the most hidden aspects of individual being". She delves into the personal and private to explore her love, even the erotic, her life that reveals the space beyond the socially accepted boundaries. Olney's (1980: 17) view is enlightening when he observes that "women who write out their inner life in autobiographies … define, for themselves and for their readers, woman as she is and as she dreams". Even as Lessing left her children from the first marriage behind, she declares her consummate desire thus: "I was going to change this ugly world, they [the children] would live in a beautiful and perfect world where there would be no race, hatred, injustice and so forth" (p. 262).

This consummate desire to change the world is already being given a life of its own, in the same breath as the new self is being born. Both processes are born through the narrative act.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has noted that the autobiographical act intrinsically involves the construction of self-identity. It has also underscored that identity as a category is provisional and is mediated through memory, language, history and culture. This intrinsically means that the autobiographical narrative is fraught with problems of veracity and objectivity. Lessing admits that "as you start to write at once the question begins to insist, Why do you remember this and not that? Or, How do you know that what you remember is more important than what you don't?" (p. 12). This also means that the autobiographer more often than not has to rely on "deduced memory" (p. 31) and has to contend with things that are "different

and parallel to received truth” (p. 41). She accedes to the possibility of some of these memories having “been dreamt” (p. 34).

Lessing constructs her self-identity over time and in time and negotiates for this identity amidst a myriad of sociocultural determinates. The Rhodesian settler culture is a key factor in the formation of the narrator’s self-identity. The identity that obtains is a product of the crucible of settler values and attitudes and their inherent contradictions. This indeed becomes yet another challenge in this autobiography, and Lessing acknowledges that “one of the difficulties of this record is how to convey the contradictions of white attitudes” (p. 72).

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