Conforming to Expectations or Defying Convention? Gender Roles in Doris Lessing's Short Story *Notes for a Case History*

Corina Mariana Mitrulescu

This paper explores Lessing's views regarding gender roles along with the idea of complying with societal expectations, in the short story "Notes for a Case History." It focuses on the examination of Maureen Watson's experiences as a young woman in post-WWII society, delving into the tensions that arise from the societal requirements to conform to traditional gender roles and the need to defy conventional norms in order to preserve one's identity. Lessing's portrayal of the protagonist's struggles highlights both the complexities of gender roles and societal pressures, ultimately questioning the structures that have traditionally defined masculinity and femininity.

Doris Lessing; feminism; female identity; gender roles; women's autonomy.

A 2007 Nobel laureate, Doris Lessing is a novelist renowned for the complex gender issues she tackles in her works. She remains one of the great literary figures of the 20th century, acclaimed not only for her prolific writing but also for her social insights. A great deal of attention has been paid to the author's novels – such as *The Grass is Singing* (1950) or *The Golden Notebook* (1962) – which feature strong female protagonists and the exploration of topics related to gender dynamics, but her short stories have received less scrutiny from researchers, although they are equally important in dealing with the idea of the liberation of women. These include nuanced narratives that question the construction of gender roles in post-WWII Europe while analysing how societal norms affect personal identity.

In order to provide a critical viewpoint on the cultural constructions of gender, this paper will look at how Lessing creates the identity of the female protagonist in "Notes for a Case History" as she navigates the dichotomy of conforming to expectations versus defying conventions and to offer a critical perspective on the societal constructs of gender. The primary framework for this analysis is represented by feminist literary criticism since

it comprises key concepts that allow an exploration of women's experiences and challenge patriarchal ideologies. The characters who populate Lessing's short story and the types of relationships they establish can be seen as a reflection of the general trend that the 1960s society was promoting in terms of gender roles.

"Notes for a Case History" was included in Doris Lessing's collection of short stories *A Man and Two Women,* a book published in 1963. It is the story of Maureen Watson, a girl born in London during WWII, who comes of age during the 1960s, a decade marked by important social and political changes. This period was defined by a growing awareness of and resistance to systematic inequalities. Feminist groups started to address important problems that women had been facing for ages, including issues related to employment, education, sexuality, family, and the reproductive rights of women. The feminist movements that emerged during this era, especially the second wave of feminism, challenged traditional gender norms and sought to bring greater equality and rights for women. Betty Friedan's 1963 seminal book *The Feminine Mystique* represented a key work and a turning point in the criticism of the idealized domesticity that emphasized women's discontent with their limited roles.

In a way, Lessing anticipated Friedan's groundbreaking work in her novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962) in which she uses as a central theme the idea of the fragmentation of female identity by the constraints of the confinement to domestic life. The main character, Ana Wulf, struggles with the disintegration of both her personal and professional life; she stands as an epitome of the broader dissatisfaction among women forced to perform the conventional roles that society has prescribed. With this novel, Lessing aims to challenge the idea that women can only achieve personal fulfilment within their domestic life, at the same time emphasizing the psychological and emotional toll of this kind of confinement.

It might be argued that Lessing had a complex relationship with the feminist label since she was critical of some of the aspects of the feminist movement, most notably for what she saw as its potential for dogmatism and oversimplification of women's issues. Nonetheless, many of her 1960s-era creations align with feminist issues, particularly those related to the exploration of women's identities and their pursuit of personal autonomy and independence. Lessing's somewhat ambiguous attitude toward gender issues is evident in her short story "Notes for a Case History", despite the fact that she is frequently associated with feminist themes.

Even from an early age, Maureen Watson, the main character in the story, proves to be a self-confident child, who is very aware of her own worth. When she turns seven, while at her birthday party, Maureen asserts her identity with conviction in front of all the mothers who were attending:

> One of the mothers said: 'This is the first unrationed party dress my Shirley has had. It's a shame, isn't it?' And her own mother said: 'Well of course these war children don't know what they've missed.' At which Maureen said: '*I* am not a war child.' 'What are you then, love?' said her mother, fondly exchanging glances. 'I am Maureen,' said Maureen." (Lessing, 1966, pp. 238-239)

With this, the protagonist clearly delineates herself from the mass of girls born during the war. As the story progresses, we see Maureen growing up and turning into what everyone considers quite a beauty. She goes to school, and she starts attracting male attention but unlike her best friend Shirley, who is happy to go out with the boys that Maureen refuses, she is very aware of her own assets and therefore she can afford to select those she finds suitable.

A recurrent theme in Lessing's works that can also be noted in this short story is related to the feminine search for self-knowledge and autonomy. Maureen embarks on a journey of self-discovery and manages to find her inner self. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) noted in her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* that the transitional periods between different stages of life are particularly challenging for women. Although this statement was made almost eight decades ago and, despite the fact that some might find it outdated due to the numerous advancements made in the decades since she published her seminal study, it is, in fact, more present than ever. Lessing also illustrates this idea in her short story. As they move into adolescence, both Maureen and Shirley try to replicate the image of famous actresses but again, unlike Shirley who *becomes* her idols, Maureen "remained herself through every rôle, but creating her appearance, like an *alter ego*, to meet the expression in people's eyes" (Lessing, 1966, p. 242).

Encouraged by her mother who imagines her daughter marrying a duke, Maureen sets out to become a fashion model. Her parents even manage to give her £100 to start her modelling career. But Maureen soon comes to the understanding that all is nothing but an illusion since "the million streets of London blossomed with girls as pretty as she" (Lessing, 1966, p. 243). Thus, Maureen's quest for identity and personal autonomy becomes a reflection of the broader feminist struggle for agency and recognition. Maureen knows that her mother's ideas are not grounded in reality and she understands that becoming her own persona means breaking from her past:

> "For one thing: if she changed her 'voice' so as to be good enough to mix with new people, she would no longer be part of this street, she would no longer be *our*

> *Maureen*. What would she be, then? Her mother knew: she would marry a duke and be whisked off to Hollywood. Maureen examined her mother's ideas for her and shrank with humiliation. She was, above all, no fool, but she had been very foolish." (Lessing, 1966, p. 243)

The protagonist has been encouraged from an early age to adhere to traditional feminine roles. Her mother embodies the image of the traditional feminine ideal, constantly encouraging her to get married and have children. Her father is less vocal than her mother and, even though he allows Maureen to pursue her studies, he also supports the view that women should prioritize family life over their personal ambitions. Everyone expects Maureen to marry young, bear children, and perform the traditional feminine role of homemaker; her beauty comes as a bonus since it can help her secure a better marriage.

Thus, with her newly found maturity, Maureen, aspiring to a life beyond the confines of domesticity, decides to ask her parents to let her use the £100 to go to the Secretarial School in search of education and a career. Sukenick suggests that Lessing's works veer away from the tradition of feminine sensibility since her "fiction is tough, clumsy, rational, concerned with social roles, collective action and conscience, and unconcerned with niceties of style and subtlety of feeling." (Sukenick, 1973, p. 516) Her female protagonists are dominated by rationality and intelligence. It is also the case of Maureen, who not only discovers the value of money but also the importance of having it because she has earned it herself without being provided by others.

At the Secretarial School, Maureen discovers the concrete meaning of the word "capital" and how it relates to "money". For a whole year, she spends her time training to become a typist; yet, because of her awareness of how to capitalize on her situation, Maureen manages to save £200 by simply not paying for her meals. She "heard other girls say they paid their way or liked to be independent" which to her seemed "wrong-headed." Maureen lets young men take her out for lunch or dinner without paying for herself because she thinks that "to pay for herself would be to let herself be undervalued: even the idea of it made her nervous and even sulky." (Lessing, 1966, p. 245) After discovering the power that money gives, Maureen starts to experience the troubles generated by the fact that she is caught between her desire to be independent and the pressure of expectations, which require women to be subservient and embrace domesticity.

After graduating from the Secretarial School, Maureen takes a junior typist job in an architect's office. She plans to use this professional environment to make new connections and to "meet a better class of people."

Maureen is intelligent enough to understand that she needs to work on both her appearance and manners if she is to find a perfect match:

> "She was using her *capital* with even more intelligence than before. A good part of her time – all not spent in the office or being taken out, went in front of her looking-glass, or with better-class fashion magazines. She studied them with formidable concentration. By now she knew she could have gone anywhere in these islands, except for her voice. Whereas, months before, she had sulked in a sort of fright at the idea of cutting herself off from her street and the neighbours, now she softened and shaped her voice, listening to the clients and the senior architects in the office. She knew her voice had changed when Shirley said: You're talking nice, Maureen, much nicer than me." (Lessing, 1966, p. 246)

The men at her office swarm around her and compete to take her out for lunch or dinner. However, after she had been taken out by almost every young man at the office and had exhausted the source of her weekly meals, Maureen quickly realises that she either has to pay for her meals and entertainment, which would obviously mean that she would not be able to save anymore, or stop going out. She also understands something even more important than that: "If she was going to be taken out, then she must give something in return. What she gave was an open mouth, and freedom to the waist. She calculated that because of her prettiness she could give much less than other girls" (Lessing, 1966, p. 246).

Meanwhile, her friend Shirley assumes her prescribed role and marries one of the lower-class assistants in the draper's store where she had been hired as a typist after graduating from school and she has a baby. Maureen, now twenty, is an independent young woman, who is able to earn her own wages and who is curious about the world. Marchino (1972) points out that Lessing endows her female protagonists with a desire for both knowledge in general, and self-knowledge, in particular. Thus, Maureen's desire for intellectual and personal freedom makes her take a trip to Italy during which she understands that she needs to brush up on her education. She starts visiting the National Gallery during her lunch break where she memorizes the names of artists and their paintings, and she goes out to see "foreign" movies. She reads books and tries to polish her speech.

At the office, she meets Tony Head, a young accountant who is "very much of her own background." Though she is hoping for a better match, Maureen still likes Tony because he is serious and ambitious. This more suitable match that she has been waiting for soon makes his appearance under the name of Stanley Hunt. An apprentice architect,

Stanley seems to have a bright future ahead of him. They go out a few times and Maureen impresses him. The same as Maureen, Stanley is also trying to catch a bigger fish. Although Maureen is beautiful and well-read, he hopes that he can strike better luck by marrying a lady. Meanwhile, Maureen understands that she has feelings for Tony Head; nevertheless, she works hard on attracting Stanely since he is the better catch.

They go out for a while and at some point, Stanley's courtship intensifies, especially after finding out that Maureen has somehow succeeded in controlling and dividing her weekly earnings so that she managed to save a considerable amount. In his opinion, this money would help a lot with the downpayment for a house if they wanted to start a family.

Lessing also attempts an exploration of the complexities of sexual relationships and the way they change the dynamics of power within a couple. As she is quickly approaching the age of twenty-two and all her childhood friends are already married with one or two children, Maureen allows her relationship with Stanley to go further. After spending a very passionate night together, Stanley finally proposes to her, and she accepts despite the fact that they both know that "She was not good enough. He was not good enough. They were second-best for each other" (Lessing, 1966, p. 251). Thus, Lessing examines how societal norms around sexuality and intercourse before marriage can be oppressive and how her protagonist struggles to mitigate her desires and the formal identity imposed within these constraints. The fact that the young couple is "second-best for each other" shows that they need to conform to societal expectations while turning a blind eye to the tension that arises between them because of the persistent gender inequalities and their incompatibility in terms of their personalities. Both female and male protagonists of the story are caught up in a labyrinth of high expectations that they themselves create which leads to disappointment in the face of reality. Libby (1974) suggests that Lessing's works comprise the idea of a compromise, in the sense that both men and women are equally victimized. Simultaneously, they are equally responsible for the situations they find themselves in.

All this while, Tony continues to taunt Maureen about her relationship with Stanley. He criticises her for wanting to marry the aspiring architect because of his prospects and not because she loves him. Tony suggests that she "would use herself" to buy a convenient life. Lessing uses Tony in a timid attempt to present men's point of view when it comes to their relationship with women: most women expect to be taken out at the expense of men who, therefore, need to make a financial effort. Tony often asks Maureen out "but only for 'Dutch treat' – expecting her to refuse. 'How's your savings account, Maureen? I can't save, you girls get it all spent on you!' (Lessing, 1966, p. 249) Thus, Tony voices the feeling that many men had at the time that they also had to embrace the roles ascribed to them, in this instance that of the *provider*. Both men and women must deal with an agglomeration of functions that the traditional gender roles have listed

for them: while women are the *homemakers*, men are the *breadwinners*; women have to *care for* their families, and men have to *cater for* them. In this sense, what Marchino (1972) suggests is relevant; she points to the fact that it is quite easy to lose one's identity precisely because it is "difficult to explore one's inner self and simultaneously meet the daily demands of the world" (p. 257).

After accepting Stanley's marriage proposal, Maureen invites him to meet her parents. She knows that he would not be impressed with them or their background; nevertheless, her parents "were part of the bargain: what he was paying in return for publicly owning the most covetable woman anywhere they were likely to be; and for the right to sleep with her after the public display" (Lessing, 1966, p. 253). Maureen's peculiar behaviour during Stanley's meeting with her parents, paired with Mrs. Watson's crying fits when she realises that Stanley is probably going to change his mind about marrying her daughter, determine the young man to abruptly leave the Watson residence. Back in her room, Maureen realises that her behaviour was dictated by her feelings for Tony. She feels happy that her relationship with Stanley will probably come to an end, so she decides to call Tony to ask him to meet.

As she patiently waits in the phone booth for Tony to pick up the phone, Maureen gloomily fathoms the predicament she finds herself in. Tony does not answer, and Stanley has just left her. Upon understanding that Tony "had been telling her, in words and without, to be something, to stay something, and now he did not care, he had let her down" (Lessing, 1966, p. 255), Maureen experiences a moment of self-doubt and calls Stanley in a desperate attempt to repair the harm done. She explains that everything was nothing but a joke and starts crying, thus managing to convince Stanley to half-heartedly forgive her even though she knows that this means that "she was in Stanely's power now: there was no balance between them, the advantage was all his" (Lessing, 1966, p. 256).

Friedman (1986) explains that Lessing follows the conventions of women's fiction in her works therefore her "protagonists are defined largely in relation to men" and that they "suffer from a paralysis in that their understanding far outstrips their ability to act" (p. 454). Maureen wants to be loved, hence her desire to be with Tony; love would grant her the freedom that she has been aspiring for since her teenage years. At the same time, she also wants to secure a good match for herself, so she accepts Stanley. Freedom and love complement each other and, paradoxically, she understands that, by marrying Stanley, she will undermine her own happiness but she is unable to act to break away from him. Maureen sacrifices her ambition, intelligence, and individuality and lets herself be absorbed into the suffocating stagnancy of an ordinary domestic life.

Nevertheless, as Sukenick (1973) points out Lessing has "little vindictiveness toward men" despite being "enormously sensitive to the ways men do not value women and to the adjustments women make in order to increase or preserve their portion of praise, love, and comfort" (p. 523). This statement is obvious in the case of Maureen who has to alter her personality and identity to be able to become Mrs. Hunt. All her carefully

woven plan thus fades into thin air, and she has to somehow give up her individuality to fit what her future husband would expect of her from now on. She becomes vulnerable while Stanley becomes culpable for accepting her even if she is not up to his standards. It is because she likes men and wants to secure a comfortable future for herself that she eventually succumbs to appropriately fitting traditional societal norms at the expense of losing her independence.

The story ends on an ambiguous note; although Maureen has struggled to gain autonomy and preserve her self, her relationships with men influence and shatter her identity and, in the end, she has to embrace the role ascribed by the traditional gender norms. The reader might thus assume that Maureen has to accept a role and put on a mask, which will eventually drive away her authentic self into a deeper and more hidden part of her being. The ending envisioned by Lessing makes us wonder whether Maureen's compromise suggests an inevitable submission to societal expectations or whether it represents a strategic choice within limited options.

The protagonist's attitude at the end of the story becomes somewhat disappointing to the female reader who genuinely believes that there could be true equality between the genders. The way she positions herself in connection to Stanley is particularly disheartening not because it implies the betrayal of the idea of an independent woman but rather because Maureen betrays herself. The protagonist thus becomes "complicit with [the] dominant values" enforced by traditional gender norms and continues to exist in a "muted" female subculture that survives "at the margins of the dominant culture" (Gardiner, 1984, p. 113).

The story does not only critique the traditional gender roles, but it also rebukes the limitations of women who submit to men. In other words, if women want to reach their full potential and "emerge as fully developed individuals, they must learn to establish their own relation to the world without relying on men as intermediaries" (Libby, 1974, p. 106).

Lessing's short story discussed in this paper reflects the evolving gender dynamics of the period and explores "deeply embedded and conflicting, cultural scripts associated with desire and decline" (Rubenstein, 2001, p. 15). It tackles issues related to women's liberation, emphasizing personal freedom and the exploration of the individual self. The idea of a new woman that Lessing promotes collides with the existing attitudes, which are still surviving from the period when women were forced into submission. The 1960s society, as described in this short story, enforces gender norms that the protagonist tries to break. The author portrays gender in a nuanced way, avoiding the simplistic traditional binaries by creating a complex female protagonist whose experiences reflect the transformative nature of this period. In her struggle toward personal autonomy, Maureen Watson is caught between the pressures of societal expectations and her desire to become independent. In the end, she is unable to "fight her own tendency to dissolve into self-pity at the threat of rejection by her man" (Libby, 1974 p. 108) and at the thought that she has been betrayed.

Lessing critiques the patriarchal control where male dominance is normalized, and women are reduced to subservient and domestic roles. "Notes for a Case History" serves as a commentary on the need for a change regarding traditional gender norms. Maureen's personal rebellion is, in fact, a plea for the recognition of women's rights and their self-fulfilment.

Doris Lessing's contributions extend beyond her literary works, influencing feminist thought. Her portrayal of women's inner lives resulting from the struggle with the inflexibility of traditional norms aims to dismantle patriarchal oppression. Her contribution is essential to the development of a more diverse literature written by women for women, which proves that women's experiences cannot be reduced to the confinement of their own homes and that they are more complex and diversified. Lessing's works continue to inspire and challenge readers, underscoring the ongoing relevance of feminist discourse in the struggle for gender equality.

References

Beauvoir, S. [1949] (2010). *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Introduction by Judith Thurman. New York: Vintage Books.

Friedman, E.G. (1986). "Doris Lessing: Fusion and Transcendence of the Female and the 'Great Tradition'." *The Centennial Review*, *30* (4), 452 – 70.

Gardiner, J.K. (1984). "Gender, Values, and Lessing's Cats." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, 3* (1/2), 111 – 24.

Libby, M.V. (1974). "Sex and the New Woman in 'The Golden Notebook'." *The Iowa Review, 5* (4), 106 – 20.

Lessing, D. (1966). *A Man and Two Women.* London: MacGibbon and Kee.

Marchino, L.A. (1972). "The Search for Self in the Novels of Doris Lessing." *Studies in the Novel, 4* (2), 252 – 61.

Rubenstein, R. (2001). "Feminism, Eros, and the Coming of Age." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, 22* (2), 1 – 19.

Sukenick, L. (1973). "Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction." *Contemporary Literature, 14* (4), 515 – 35.

Assistant Professor Corina Mariana Mitrulescu, PhD. She is a member of the Department of Applied Social Sciences and Humanities within the Land Forces Academy of Sibiu, Romania. Her main areas of interest are modernist literature, gender studies, and military translations and terminology. (mitrulescu.corina@armyacademy.ro)