Doris Lessing
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A 1960s London household is anchored by a wise, empathetic maternal figure, inhabited by an intergenerational affinitive family of intellectuals and misfits, artists and politicos, washed by the successive tides of the Zeitgeist, rocked by revolutions in Africa and Europe. The great house is more than a microcosm; rather it is a laboratory for the utopian hypotheses of the mid-twentieth century: Communism, psychoanalysis, decolonization, feminism. Through the great house blow the winds of change; to the great house flock youth from every continent, whose creative energies might save humanity, but whose inherited neuroses will doom them to repeat the mistakes of their elders. In her 2001 novel, *The Sweetest Dream*, Lessing uses their experiences, interwoven with the stories of the preceding generations, to challenge the abstract isms and dogmas of her time. In the twenty-first century, she resituates the London house of Anna Wulf and Martha Quest as the home of a new kind of mothering with the potential to resolve some of the ideological binaries and colonialist hierarchies that bedevil her earlier characters.

The promise of youth and the tragedy of generational repetition is a constant motif in Lessing’s work, as is the dynamic interplay between colony and metropole, Africa and Europe. As its predominantly warm reviews in the British press acknowledged, *The Sweetest Dream* is a reprise of the themes, settings, and characters of her major novels of the 1960s: *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969). *The Sweetest Dream* is a revisionary memory of these earlier novels and a reaffirmation of
the genre of social-psychological realism as central to Lessing’s oeuvre. The attributes and preoccupations of the millennial novel’s central female character, Frances Lennox, are remarkably consistent with The Golden Notebook’s Anna Wulf and The Four-Gated City’s Martha Quest. Like Martha Quest, whose story culminates in the fifth, London novel, of the autobiographical Children of Violence series, which began with Martha Quest (1952), Frances Lennox mothers a surrogate family, balancing responsibility and freedom, love and work, traditional femininity and countercultural feminism, the political and personal, the individual and the collective. Unlike Anna, through whom Lessing explored the creative territory of madness, or Martha, who led her author’s forays into postapocalyptic fiction, Frances is firmly anchored in social realism, a tradition that Lessing fully exploits in The Sweetest Dream.

The house-mother is Lessing’s fulcrum, the ordering figure around whom swirl the chaotic visions and contradictory emotions of the young, in particular the surrogate daughters who might carry on her work of nurturing and protecting the human good, of saving the world on their home ground. This essay focuses on the millennial mutations of the house-mother who has long been Lessing’s trope for the woman writer of her generation, class, and colonial provenance; Martha Quest in her various fictional permutations is a daughter of Virginia Woolf’s Mary Beton with a room of her own and 500 pounds a year. However, like Woolf’s alter ego in “Professions for Women,” Lessing’s authorial alter egos are also haunted by the demonic Angel in the House, the specter of self-effacement and self-censorship, idealized in Coventry Patmore’s Victorian poem. Thus the unresolved tension between the homemaker and the woman-who-writes-at-home is a continuing theme for Lessing as well as for Woolf. Whereas the writer-character Anna Wulf follows her namesake in breaking free of the specter of the Angel, inventing a literary form to embody her creative struggle, Frances Lennox fails to become an independent artist, remaining enmeshed in the needs of others but also finding her vocation in expressing their concerns. Like the Rhodesian-bred Martha Quest, who also has internalized the ideology of second-class status among the London elites, Frances is disempowered by class as well as gender.

Taken together, the three blocked-artist house-mother characters depict the range of choices that their author saw for women such as herself in midcentury Britain. Through Frances and her surrogate daughter Sylvia, whose stories—unlike Martha’s—remain anchored in the here and now, Lessing seems to celebrate the creative potential of traditional feminine values of self-sacrifice and collaboration to build community and to repair the ravages wrought by the totalitarian systems she has come to deplore.
Whereas Woolf was a lifelong Englishwoman *at home* in upper-class bohemian London, Lessing was a déclassé white African in exile; in her work, mother (country) and home (land) are complicated markers of identity for a woman writer *making* a home in postwar, postcolonial London at mid-century, then revisioned at the turn of the millennium. Frances Lennox is a class outsider, who, like Martha Quest, the colonial outsider, renovates, domesticates, and reorders the lives of London insiders, taking on an upper-middle-class house and family in need of her care, as she is in need of a home to repair and children to re-mother. The cost is the sacrifice of their individual creative identities for the collective good, to live—like Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*—for and through the children and the children’s children. Martha and Frances are, finally, heroic maternal figures who create for and through their beloved others. As Mrs. Ramsay’s heirs repair her house and paint her vision, so Martha’s survivors reinvent human society after nuclear catastrophe, and Frances’s children repair and reinvent the bond between metropolitan London and postcolonial Africa. The substantial section of *The Sweetest Dream* that narrates the story of Frances’s surrogate daughter Sylvia as a mission doctor in Zimlia is analogous to the Black or African Notebook in *The Golden Notebook* and can be read as a bookend to the Zambesia novels that precede *The Four-Gated City*. The AIDS orphans Sylvia brings home to the Lennox house might be the descendants of Martha’s surrogate child Joseph, the mutant black boy born of nuclear survivors in the Faroe Islands, who carries his gifts to Nairobi, where the remnants of world civilization are resettled. Thus Lessing’s lifelong transformation of her own white-settler heritage in her novels circles through *The Sweetest Dream*, in which postcolonial idealism and apocalyptic vision continue the dance that fuels her fictional imagination.

Doris Lessing, as she has recorded in both her fiction and her autobiography, arrived in postwar London from British colonial Southern Rhodesia, the manuscript of her first novel in one hand, her young son in the other. The two children from her first marriage, left with her ex-husband in Africa, haunt her narratives, creating a void that her autobiographical protagonists fill with surrogate children and youths whom they shelter, feed, and counsel. The beloved farmhouse of her childhood, described memorably in *Martha Quest* and appearing throughout her writing, also haunts her narratives, creating a void that is filled in the London novels by houses modeled on those the author has inhabited. The London house—solid, Victorian, multistoried and multilayered with social and literary history, windows open to urban gardens and great trees—replaces, but doesn’t quite supplant, the pole-and-thatch farmhouse—a blend of European and African construction, hybrid
and makeshift (like white-settlerdom itself), open to the elements, with a magnificent vista of high veldt and distant mountains. As critics such as Victoria Rosner have demonstrated, this house in Rhodesia comes to symbolize the white woman writer’s ambivalent relationship to colonial motherhood and her complicated nostalgia for Africa. Its counterpart, the iconic London house, comes to symbolize the exile’s artistic self-invention and her experiments with new kinds of maternal relationships that offer models for resolving the feminine dilemma of the woman who must balance the needs of self and others, private and public. It is in this postcolonial urban setting that Lessing’s female heroes confront and work through the great public issues of the midcentury, translating and testing the great abstract isms in the realm of the real, of everyday experience. Martha, Anna, and Frances reinvent not only conventional wife-and-motherhood and the feminine artistic tradition, but also the masculinist conventions of politics, including the supposedly progressive, oppositional politics of the Left. They model in the private, domestic sphere a workable version of the Socialist-Communist ideals—“the sweetest dreams” of a new social order—that have been largely discredited in the public, political sphere. In Frances’s household, for example, the adults pool their resources to pay the school fees of whichever kids are in need, following Marx’s dictum “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.” And her evening meals, a cross between soup kitchen and political salon, literally nourish the progressive counterculture.

Lessing follows Woolf in challenging the dichotomy between the domestic novel on the one hand and the discourse of history and politics on the other. As Nancy Armstrong argues, “[t]o consider the rise of the domestic woman as a major event in political history is not, as it may seem, to present a contradiction in terms, but to identify the paradox that shapes modern culture.” Woolf uses modernism and feminism to recouple the language of private life with the language of politics in *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*, as well as in her novels which, as recent Woolf criticism has demonstrated, engage profoundly with the great issues of her day: from war and imperialism to scientific discoveries and new systems of knowledge. Whereas Lessing absorbed Woolf’s modernist critique of received wisdom and conventional ways of knowing—her fiction, like Woolf’s, depicts consciousness as fluid, character as multiple, and closure as suspect—she does not reject, but rather reconceives, the tradition against which Woolf positioned herself, that of nineteenth-century social realism. Lessing travels back to realism through modernism and postmodernism, having assimilated Woolf’s attack on the superficiality of realism in favor of exploring the interiority of consciousness: “this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” as Woolf describes
in “Modern Fiction.” As critics who have compared the two authors demonstrate, they employ similar multipersonal and dialogic modes (argues Claire Sprague), share nostalgia for the lost mother (suggests Roberta Rubenstein), and write from the perspective of the outsider within (according to Christine Sizemore).

Lessing’s recasting of themes and techniques of Woolf’s feminist modernism in her predominantly realist fiction is part of a wider movement in British fiction. Literary historians of the contemporary British novel have argued that the genre of social realism has been remarkably adaptable and vibrant. Dominic Head describes the second half of the twentieth century as a creative renaissance for the novel of society, whose “key developments . . . have been made in the spirit of supplementing, rather than rejecting, given forms.”

Head suggests that even the genre he identifies as “British Postmodernism” is “a hybrid form of expression that renegotiates tradition” and involves “the reader’s willing acceptance that the text provides a bridge to reality.”

Andrzej Gąsiorek finds realism and experimentalism to be a false dichotomy in contemporary British fiction, arguing in particular that Doris Lessing “produces texts in which realism splinters into a wide range of alternative narrative modes” without abandoning the traditional narrative contract between text and context, artifice and reality.

He maintains that the work of Lessing and other contemporary realists “seeks in distinctive ways to retain realism’s strengths, particularly its attention to the social and intersubjective nature of human life, while at the same time confronting the problem of representation. . . . These novels avow realism’s referential impulse but reject any simple reflectionist aesthetic.”

Lessing’s reaffirmation of the realist tradition has also been noted by the reviewers of The Sweetest Dream in the British press. Lisa Appignanesi writes that it is like “coming upon a long lost novel by George Eliot or Balzac. . . . The Sweetest Dream belongs with The Golden Notebook and the Children of Violence sequence: the great novels of Doris Lessing’s period of social and psychological realism. It’s not only a matter of style or authorial voice, but of history.”

Jane Shilling opines that her “moral engagement with her material, like her pungent characterization and flaying of hypocrisy, together with the confidence with which she sets a scene and her unexpected moments of sentimentiality, mark out Lessing as a 21st-century virtuoso in the great 19th-century fictional manner.” And Lisa Allardice proclaims that Lessing is “the grande dame of big ideas. . . . The current vogue is for literary self-absorption and slim historical anecdote; this unfashionably worthy behemoth belongs to a more idealistic age. . . . despite her disenchantment with
past obsessions, it seems she still believes in the power of literature to change the world.”

_The Sweetest Dream_ embodies Lessing’s reengagement with the nineteenth-century realist novel and, more contentiously, her reengagement with the nineteenth-century feminine ideal of the Angel in the House—albeit critically—at the expense of the Free Women, celebrated—albeit ironically—in _The Golden Notebook_. For example, Anna Wulf’s long writing table with the color-coded notebooks wherein she creatively orders her experiences becomes in _The Sweetest Dream_ Frances’s kitchen table whereat she feeds the talk and fuels the activism of others—from her charismatically delusional ex-husband Comrade Johnny, to the variously troubled and talented youth whose myriad causes replace the spectrum of colors in Anna’s notebooks. A domestication of the notebooks might also be read in the structure of the great house in Hampstead, whose floors echo the literary divisions created by Anna Wulf. Although Frances, like Anna, is a writer, a respected journalist, her writing pays the school fees and feeds the hungers of her ever-extending family. Her “real” work is the theater, but she turns down several exciting creative opportunities in favor of the steady income from her earnest, socially responsible books and articles. Virginia Tiger argues that this “Condition of England novel” replaces “_The Golden Notebook_’s competing narrative frames” with “competing narrative focalizations . . . that emerge from the constantly shifting points of view.” The divided selves of the creative individual, as represented by the fragmented narratives of Anna’s notebooks, are replaced in _The Sweetest Dream_ by the collective of narratives in which the creative individual’s voice is submerged. In place of the earlier novel’s Golden Notebook of (at least provisional) creative unity and transcendence, the later novel offers the vicarious achievement of the passing on of the maternal role from grandmother to grandchildren, symbolized by the spinning dance in which little Celia weaves her extended family.

Frances, like Martha Quest in _The Four-Gated City_, is a nurturer of and collaborator in the work of others. But in contrast to Martha’s discovery that the creative insights of madness will enable the clairvoyant few to survive nuclear holocaust, Frances’s aspirations are realistically modest: to pay everyone’s school fees and get a hot meal on the dinner table. The narrative of Doctor Sylvia in Zimlia, which might seem to expand the ambitions of the Lennox family story, is similarly constrained by the realistic details of local poverty and state corruption: when Sylvia comes home to London to die, she leaves the mission with a shelf of books and a cupboard of basic medicines. In place of Martha’s postnuclear child, Joseph, who is the harbinger of a new
human race, Sylvia’s wards, Clever and Zebedee, are bright survivors of a 
real-life plague without magical cure. However, Sylvia’s emigration to Zimlia 
and the return of the African children to London completes the symbolic pat-
ttern that began with Martha’s emigration from Zambesia and Joseph’s return 
to Africa in her stead. Thus The Sweetest Dream does more than replay or 
recast the earlier novels: its realistic satire and relatively modest aspirations 
critique the ambitious vision and grand scale of the Children of Violence 
series; its depiction of Zimlia moves Lessing’s critique of British colonialism 
in Southern Africa into the era of HIV/AIDS and neocolonial corruption, in 
the process reaffirming the historical responsibility that “London” has for 
“Zambesia.”

Whereas Frances’s self-sacrifice may be read on the autobiographical level 
as atonement for Lessing’s own ambivalence toward her biological children, 
on the larger cultural level, Frances’s re-mothering is a compensatory revision 
of the emotional cost of authorship for the woman writer-artist in the mid-
twentieth century. In The Sweetest Dream, Lessing has not killed the Victo-
rian specter of the self-sacrificing Angel in the House, but rather rehoused her 
in a domestic space that is large enough to contain the public sphere, to make 
and be made by history. Like the earlier novels, this novel engages deeply and 
knowingly with the clichéd but essential adage that the personal is political 
and vice versa. And in this novel most markedly and unambiguously the door 
of the great house in London opens upon the world. Politics and history are 
not so much domesticated as embodied and housed in the Lennox residence. 
At Frances’s capacious kitchen table, Lessing skewers the dangerous naïveté 
of some of the big ideas of the twentieth century—Communist revolution, 
anticolonial nationalism, youth counterculture, and feminism—then reimag-
ines them in more realistic, small-scale, familial terms.

When The Sweetest Dream begins in the mid-1960s, Frances is a journal-
ist for The Defender (i.e., the venerable, left-of-center Guardian): “She had a 
name for solid balanced articles that often shone an unexpected and original 
light on a current scene.”27 She critiques the mystique of “Carnaby Street” and 
“Swinging London,” as “some sort of collective hallucination.”28 She targets 
the conformity of sixties fashion—unisex clothes, Vidal Sassoon haircuts, Biba 
dresses—and “the fad for [the] alien excitements” of Eastern mysticism—from 
the I Ching to the Maharishi.29 Many of Frances’s stories are inspired by the 
trends and common concerns she notes in the letters to the newspaper’s advice 
columnist, Aunt Vera. These distraught missives from confused housewives 
and mothers are echoed in the problems of Frances’s own unruly household, 
in which her wards, too, shoplift, have unprotected sex, smoke marijuana, 
drop out of school, and run away from home. As in the case of Anna Wulf’s
prolific literary productivity in *The Golden Notebook*, it is unclear when Frances actually finds the time to write her long, well-researched articles for *The Defender*; whereas much of *The Golden Notebook* is taken up with Anna’s busy and dramatic erotic life, so *The Sweetest Dream* focuses more on Frances’s absorbing maternal duties than on her creative work. In both cases, however, the characters’ personal concerns and responsibilities deeply color but do not seem to impede their intellectual productivity. The Angel in these houses does not stop the woman writer from writing, but rather reminds her of her connections to the others for whom she writes. In Anna’s case, the pull of the individual’s responsibility to the community—from her daughter, lovers, and friends to the Communist Party and then the Labour movement—becomes the story, as Anna’s fragmented notebooks become the novel. In Frances’s case, the pull of responsibility to others channels her creative aspirations away from the medium of the theater (her longed-for career, always snatched from her reach by practical considerations) into the more reliable, better-paid medium of journalism (a choice that she initially sees as pedestrian and second-rate). Frances’s articles are anchored in, even weighed down by, the domestic concerns she shares with her female readers, yet these concerns, and her balanced, nuanced treatment of them, epitomize the conflicts of the times, which revolve around the all-important relationship between the generations: between the past and the future.

At the end of the sixties, a hardening of feminist orthodoxy complicates Frances’s relationship with the other women journalists on *The Defender*, whose self-righteous adherence to the politically correct party line conflicts with her more nuanced and questioning stance. She also opposes (as Lessing did) the paper’s support for unilateral nuclear disarmament, leading Frances “to conclude that working for *The Defender* was not unlike being Johnny’s wife: she had to shut up and think her own thoughts. This was why she had always taken so much work home.” Within this house, Frances maintains a complicated relationship with her mother-in-law, Julia, a Clarissa Dalloway figure whose old money maintains the new family configuration. In descending order of generations, Julia keeps her elegant, old-fashioned aerie at the top of the house while Frances and her changing cast of “kids” occupy the space below. The downstairs kitchen with its huge table is “the life of the house,” where Frances serves such iconic meals as “a large, filling, winter stew of beef and chestnuts, from a recipe of Elizabeth David’s.” Frances’s recipes from *French Country Cooking*, the narrator notes, are also informed by the Zeitgeist: the “culinary revolution” in British cooking serves as a kind of domestic preview of the French student revolt of 1968. Frances herself is rarely described as eating. Like Woolf’s Angel, who, when there is chicken,
takes the leg (and when there is a draft, sits in it), Frances feeds her delicacies to the kids (whom she also tries to protect from life’s cold drafts). Unlike the mythical Angel, however, she is realistically resentful of, if unsurprised by, the heedlessness and greed of the young.

Frances receives letters from other women like herself:

Thus did the house-mothers, the earth-mothers, who proliferated everywhere in the Sixties slowly become aware of each other’s presence out there, and understand that they were part of a phenomenon: the geist was at it again. . . . They were a network of . . . neurotic nurturers. As “the kids” had explained, Frances was working out some guilt or other . . . working on her karma, damaged in a previous life.\textsuperscript{32}

As are Lessing’s other autobiographical protagonists Anna and Martha, Frances is depicted as a representative social type, emblematic of her gender, class, and historical moment. The novel traces the trajectory of about twenty years, during which the children leave the nest, Julia (like Mrs. Ramsay) passes from the narrative, and Frances, at sixty, finds love “of the quotidian, daily-bread sort, not at all a teenagers’ romp” with a younger colleague,\textsuperscript{33} whom she marries and whose children she then takes on, ever the house-mother.

The novel’s critical retrospection on its period is conveyed through Frances’s sardonic point of view of “the spirit of universal liberal idealism . . . that spirit of \textit{everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds}, which would one day be shorthand for ‘the Sixties.’”\textsuperscript{34} The crises of the house are enacted against the backdrop of world crises: when Comrade Johnny drops by to cadge a meal, he brings to the table the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the burgeoning independence movements of Southern Africa, the popular uprisings in Eastern Europe, and the war in Vietnam. Among those who eat at Frances’s midcentury table are future members of the anticolonial national liberation movements of Zimlia, such as Franklin, a scholarship boy at her son’s progressive school, whose puzzled, lonely perspective on the excesses of groovy London parallels Frances’s jaundiced middle-aged critique. As the kitchen empties and Frances’s life narrative is becalmed, the setting shifts to Zimlia, where Franklin achieves power in the government of another of Frances’s dinner guests, Comrade, now President, Matthew Mungozi (a fictionalized depiction of Robert Mugabe).

The African narrative centers on Sylvia’s ascetic life as a doctor at a Catholic mission hospital in rural Zimlia, where the scarcity of resources and stoic suffering of the people provide another critical angle on the hedonism of sixties London—as well as another incarnation of its idealism. The
mission is beset by governmental corruption and anticolonial paranoia, as through the narrative of Doctor Sylvia’s quest, Lessing chronicles the post-independence history of Zimbabwe under Mugabe. Whereas Sylvia’s medical intervention might be read as a more practical and useful version of Martha Quest’s ineffectual Communist meetings in the *Children of Violence* series, Lessing’s mercilessly realistic narrative condemns her too to failure. Sylvia is doomed in part by the dynamic of relationships that began at Frances’s table. Whereas Frances’s son Andrew has become an international aid guru, resentful hanger-on Rose is a sensation-seeking journalist who writes paens of praise for President Mungozi and diatribes against her childhood rival Sylvia. Lessing, ever attuned to journalistic bias, parodies Rose’s exposé: “Granddaughter of a notorious Nazi, daughter of a career communist, Sylvia Lennox has found a hideyhole in Zimbria, where she owns a private hospital, supplied by equipment stolen from the local government hospital.” Smeared by Rose, defeated by a hostile government, laid low by malaria, the dying Sylvia returns home to London with her two AIDS orphans. Clever and Zebedee, the survivors of the catastrophic epidemic, are the millennial version of the mutant children who survive nuclear catastrophe in *The Four-Gated City*. In Martha Quest’s narrative, the children’s story emerges from the fragments of documents in the appendix to the realistic novel. In *The Sweetest Dream*, the story of the African boys is integrated into the realistic narrative, under the aegis of the house-mother and her daughters. In Lessing’s millennial reworking of the Africa-Europe, colony-metropole dichotomy, the African narrative is not bracketed into a Black Notebook or displaced into a dystopic future, but rather becomes the central story. The orphaned Zimbrians are adopted into the London family whose power and influence, like that of Britain itself, has become muted and diffuse. The future of the Lennoxes, Lessing signals, is in the hands of the eager, precocious black children of empire.

“Once a Sixties household, then always a Sixties household,” declares Frances’s son Colin, as in the final scene of the novel, Frances and Johnny and their new configuration of English and African children, stepchildren, and grandchildren gather round the kitchen table again. In this last scene, Frances’s small granddaughter, Celia, runs from one family member to another, claiming them, binding them, spinning them together. In the novel’s closing sentence, Celia is not “gathered and held” by her family, but rather “sing[s] for herself and to herself.” Unlike the house-mothers in this and other Lessing novels, Celia is not (yet) bound by responsibility and guilt. Thus she represents the sweetest dream of all in Lessing’s work: the girl who will not become her mother. Yet although Celia spins and sings for and to herself, full of possibilities, her song names the family: “Yes, my Colin, yes,
my Sophie, yes, and there’s my poor little Johnny. . . .”  

Her affectionate diminutive for her grandfather signals that she is a protomother, an incipient Angel in the House, spinning the web of care, singing the lullaby of reassurance. As Virginia Tiger puts it, “For all its derisive debunking of feminism, The Sweetest Dream is really about women who simply get on with it. Julia, Frances, Sylvia: these are the women who engage in small, but sustaining, acts of philanthropy.”  

Lessing’s depiction of these characters seems to argue that although mothering is freed from its biological bonds (as house-mother Frances and Doctor Sylvia exemplify), and each of the female characters interprets the mother role with different emphases, they cannot evade this sine qua non of the feminine. What they can do is to reinterpret the maternal by translating its ethos into the public sphere: from Frances’s domestic journalism to Sylvia’s missionary medicine.

In this late Lessing novel, then, the social-psychological realism of The Golden Notebook and the Children of Violence series is reaffirmed: the “small personal voice” that the author has defended since the beginning of her career continues to provide trenchant political commentary; the domestic space is contiguous with the public sphere, the individual feminine life woven into the continuing life of the collective.  

The character of Frances benefits from her author’s hindsight as she looks back with the ironic detachment and common sense of old age on the chaotic and painful decades she chronicles. Frances is shrewder and wiser than her often tortured, introspective fictional foremothers Anna and Martha. Whereas Lessing warns in the author’s note to the novel, “I am not writing volume three of my autobiography because of possible hurt to vulnerable people,” she also has long proclaimed her faith in the historical accuracy and emotional truth of fiction.  

Through Frances, Lessing seems to make peace with her own ex-husbands and lovers, biological and surrogate children. Even the horrific mother figure of Mrs. Quest (based on the author’s sense of her own mother as smothering and controlling) is replaced with Julia, the distant but kindly mother-in-law who graciously cedes control of the house that she in fact owns. Although the ideological rhetoric of the sixties is satirized, the characters and settings are depicted with nostalgia; the dizzy round of demos and parties and meetings is vividly recalled; the Christmas feasts are lingered over; and the Biba dresses and Sassoon hairstyles are lovingly detailed.

In terms of the African material, which balances and contextualizes the London setting in The Sweetest Dream as in The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City, the exploitation of Rhodesia by British colonialists is downplayed in comparison with the exploitation of the citizens of independent Zimlia by the postcolonial regime (Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe)—in
partnership with the neocolonialism of the international donor community. The white farmers and missionaries in Zimlia heroically resist the destructive corruption of the black-ruled state and its international allies. Thus Lessing might be accused of nostalgia for more than Biba dresses and Elizabeth David food: Is the novel nostalgic for the colonial order, the retrospectively sweet dream of an African continent tinted British pink, traversed by the ghost vision of Cecil Rhodes’ Cape-to-Cairo railroad? Or does it reflect the author’s contemporary disillusionment with the autocratic and exploitative Mugabe regime, which has betrayed the dreams of African nationalism and the anti-colonial movements that she has supported throughout her career? Lessing has long examined the “lying nostalgia” of colonial memory (as Anna Wulf names it in the notebooks). Roberta Rubenstein argues that Lessing’s writing, like Woolf’s, reflects the tension between “nostalgia as a comforting recollection and nostalgia as a deception of memory; between profound emotional loss and imaginative reparation and healing.”

This ambivalent nostalgia for the mother (country) is embodied in Lessing’s depictions of her childhood home in Southern Rhodesia. The white-settler house is a site of ambivalence, resented as a boundary-marker of colonial femininity, a maternal skin, but valued for its permeable walls, its construction out of native materials, its impurity and impermanence. Writes Victoria Rosner, “domestic space in the colonies was inexorably linked to the maternal body, creating the grounds for the psychological and territorial contest of a daughter’s separation from her mother.” She notes Lessing’s desire to “break down the house/bush division” enforced by the mother, and so to “reject the racist logic upon which settler culture rests.” The settler house was built to impose European domestic order on the African land, but in Lessing’s account it failed. Martha Quest and the similarly rebellious young female protagonists of many of the African stories rejoice in the Africanization of their mothers’ houses: the invasion by tree roots and termites, dust and humidity. They sleep with their doors open and welcome the noisy African night. Yet these daughters of British farm owners cannot bridge the racial, linguistic, economic, and legal gulf between their romantic good intentions and the brutal realities of colonial apartheid in the 1930s and 1940s. Martha Quest moves to town and becomes a Communist with the aim of turning this social order upside down. The Children of Violence novels and The Golden Notebook analyze the failure of the white revolutionaries to establish links with indigenous political movements and to translate the Party line into practical action. The novels depict as inevitable Martha’s and Anna’s flight into exile in London, their idealism tarnished but their ambitious sense of mission intact. Sylvia’s mission hospital in the bush, where she works for
change with a cast of African characters more nuanced and developed than the cardboard figures in the early novels, is a more solid and promising version of Europe-in-Africa than Martha’s imaginary city in the veld. The story of its failure is, in Lessing’s view, the story of the failure of the postcolonial project, of the dream of African liberation.

As the ideal of postcolonial Africa dims in Lessing’s late novel, the lights of the house in London burn more brightly. The cosmopolitan house in which the rebellious colonial daughter reinvents the middle-class British family on her own antipatriarchal, postcolonial terms is modeled on the ideal architecture of the lost African home as a potential site of the coexistence of culture and nature, Europe and Africa. Like the pole-and-thatch house in Martha Quest and Sylvia’s bush hospital, the house in Hampstead also defies the border between inside and outside, private and public. It too is a site of “the border-defying body of the mother” (as Rosner paraphrases Julia Kristeva’s theory of the maternal in her analysis of settler architecture). The London house is home, in the fictional logic of The Sweetest Dream, to a new kind of mothering, and potentially reproduces progressive ideologies that counter the logic of settler colonialism, with its either/or binaries and white/black hierarchies. The return of Sylvia and the Zimlian boys reinforces this hopeful argument. The impoverished African orphans Clever and Zebedee will be integrated into the elite British Lennox family, promising that the “colour-bar” of Southern African apartheid, long a preoccupation in Lessing’s work, will finally become obsolete.

Certainly, each of Lessing’s novels bears the marks of its own time, its particular moment in political and social history: as she writes in The Sweetest Dream, “When the geist speaks, the zeit must obey.” At the turn of the twenty-first century the geist speaks with different emphases than it did in the midst of the 1960s: it is a reminiscent and revisionist spirit that animates this novel, alternately generous and critical, rosy and jaundiced. As the reviewers noted in their comparisons to Balzac and George Eliot, this big old-fashioned novel remembers the postmodern mid-twentieth century through nineteenth-century realism as well as Woolfian modernism. To follow the trajectory of Lessing’s autobiographical characters, from Martha Quest and Anna Wulf to Frances and Sylvia Lennox, is to see that the old archetypes of feminine self-sacrifice have not been laid to rest by the feminist ideals of self-actualization and authority. The Angel in the House has proved remarkably resilient and potent. However, Lessing’s mordantly realistic depiction of women characters embedded in history, absorbing and (re)producing ideology, suggests that she isn’t simply rewriting Eliot, that she has in fact rethought the nineteenth-century realist novel from the perspective of a mid-twentieth-century British
colonial outsider—a “reverse immigrant” to London, as she has called herself. Lessing’s house-mothers are descended from the outsider heroines, the rebellious daughters of Victorian fiction, from Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre to Olive Schreiner’s Lyndall: protagonists who use their class or colonial differences to critique dominant ideologies and so to renovate the house of fiction. Lessing’s domestic women follow Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway and the Marys of A Room of One’s Own in breaking down the distinctions between private and public spheres, between the personal and political, between self and other, insider and outsider, house and world. Frances’s homebound story, like Martha’s house-centered quest, like Clarissa’s domestic odyssey, refigures and reorients the depiction of the domestic sphere in the novel of social realism. To be a mother in Lessing’s fiction is to be inescapably a vehicle for the reproduction of the social order of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism; but the mother is also a nurturer of potentially revolutionary social change: from French cooking to French protest movements. It is especially the non-biological house-mother who can break the psychological bonds of inherited ideology.

The Annas and Marthas, the Franceses and Sylvias in Lessing’s fiction have the power to remake the past and salvage lives. The endings of the three novels seem very different in genre and tone. The ironic ending of The Golden Notebook stresses the realistic compromises of “free women”; in the visionary science-fiction ending of The Four-Gated City, Martha’s quest is passed on to other survivors of planetary cataclysm; in the sentimental ending of The Sweetest Dream, the maternal figure is reunited with her “kids” and the next generation’s Angel sings her song. In each version of closure, however, the protagonist’s historical memory and intellectual vision evolve into new forms; her creative lifeblood is transfused to the representatives of the next generation in the (forlorn but persistent) hope that they might learn from the mistakes of their elders. In the novel of the new millennium, satire shades into romance, Africa comes “home” to London, and Lessing reaffirms her faith in mothering as a profoundly creative endeavor grounded in the realistic experience of ordinary women.

NOTES


2. For example, Jerome Boyd Maunsell writes, “Scathingly dry, yet somehow optimistic; calm, yet still emotional, Lessing is on untouchable form,” review of The Sweetest
3: House/Mother


9. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Modern Library, 1937). See also Ruth Saxton’s discussion of the ways that Frances Lennox comes to terms with her own needs and those of others and, especially, with her sexuality in her chapter, “Sex After Sixty: love, again and *The Sweetest Dream,*” in Part Four of this collection [editors’ note].
20. Ibid., 229.
22. Ibid., 181–82.
28. Ibid., 40.
29. Ibid., 126.
30. Ibid., 228.
31. Ibid., 14.
32. Ibid., 143.
33. Ibid., 230.
34. Ibid., 21.
35. Ibid., 421.
36. Ibid., 472.
37. Ibid., 479.
38. Ibid.
41. This is a claim she affirms in the 1993 introduction to The Golden Notebook, in which she says, regarding the writing of her autobiography, “I have to conclude that fiction is better at ‘the truth’ than a factual record.” Introduction 1993 [to The Golden Notebook] (1994; repr., New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), ix.
44. Ibid., 84.
45. Ibid., 83. Rosner refers to Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjec-
3: House/Mother

