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# Narratives of Singleness:
# Fluid Female Identities in Postmodern Times

With a Foreword by MONICA BOTTEZ

Chapter 1

# Fictional Worlds in Margaret Atwood's and Doris Lessing's Early Works

## 1.1 Introduction

Before I move on to a detailed examination of the concepts and ideas already mentioned in the Introduction, I would like to explain briefly the reason for having chosen these two female writers. As a point of contention, the choice of Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood as postmodernists may be questioned. Implicit in such a context is my intention to study the postmodernist tendencies that can be identified in the early works of the two novelists in conjunction with the development of the second-wave feminism in order to demonstrate the existence of the dynamic relations between their fictions, feminism and social theory.

Atwood and Lessing represent an interesting subject regarding my examination of the connection between theory and fiction for two reasons. Firstly, their careers, which date from the writing of their novels in the early 1960s, span the four decades in which second-wave feminism has so actively developed and counter-developed, and secondly, because they are so obviously culturally and theoretically –aware writers who both use and challenge the ideas which permeate their culture. Subsequently, the reason for which I am particularly interested in their early works is also connected to the theoretical approaches (see Introduction) that highlight the fact that Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood have always been ahead the literary trends of their times both in terms of content, their life and experiences propelling them to create their own ideology.

A consequence of this awareness is a tension between the literary theorist who would read Atwood's and Lessing's novels in terms of a prevalent theory

such as feminism, and the self-consciously theoretical or political aspects of their novels. This conflict is peculiar to the contemporary writer and is largely a postmodern or metafictional dilemma. What I want to stress is that the text is no longer a passive recipient of theoretical interpretation, but enters into a dynamic relationship with the theoretical discourse, frequently anticipating future developments yet to be articulated by an academic discourse.

## 1.2 Reality and Fiction

### 1.2.1 The Principle of Mimesis

Although fact and fiction are defined as opposed concepts because the first is a product of life and the second of art, writers have attempted to represent reality in fiction. The relationship between reality and fiction, or, in terms of historiography, between fact and fiction, has always been interesting for writers and literary scholars. The closest connection between reality and fiction in which art tries to imitate life is assumed by the term mimesis:

> Mimesis is a term that derives from classical Greek drama where it referred to the actors' direct imitation of words and actions. This is perhaps the most exact form of correspondence or fidelity between representation and actuality (Morris 5).

The term goes back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who thought that "a literary work" should "be reproducing and reflecting an external reality" at its best (Aristotle 157). Wellek and Warren support the same idea in *Theory of Literature*. Accordingly, literature "imitates" "life", and "life" is, to a high degree, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of individual have also been objects of literary imitation (Wellek and Warren 89). Literary works such as drama and novel represent life (54), the primary materials of many literary works being human behavior experience, human ideas and attitudes (241). The reality of a work of a fiction – for instance, its illusion of reality, its effects on the reader as a convincing reading of life- is not necessarily or primarily a reality of circumstance, detail or commonplace routine (Wellek and Warren 213).

In the same theoretical framework, Morris asserts that "in current usage mimesis refers to the representation of the real world in visual and verbal art" (167) and is also connected to the concept of 'verisimilitude' (5) which is defined as "the appearance of being true or real; likeness or resemblance to truth, reality or fact" (5).

In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Erich Auerbach's well-known theoretical work on the representation of reality in

Western literature, the author analyses how fictional worlds are depicted in classical texts from Homer to Virginia Woolf. He begins with classical and religious texts the seriousness and tragic nature of which demanded an appropriate realistic depiction. The concept of mimesis is taken further again in the literary movement of realism. Auerbach writes about "the atmospheric realism of Balzac" and "the descriptivism of Flaubert" (White 96).

According to Hayden White, Auerbach stresses in *Mimesis* that the specific aim of western literature is to represent reality truthfully:

> Western literature's concept consists in the recognition that every representation (Vorstellung) is also a presentation (Darstellung) and, as such, inspires western writers to the development of a practice of stylistic innovation ever better adapted to the depiction of reality as various in its forms as it is multiple in its meanings. The history of Western literature displays an ever fuller consciousness of Western literature's unique project, which is nothing other than the fulfilment of its unique promise to represent reality realistically. (White 88)

This theory does not only refer to the nineteenth century realism as practised by Honoré de Balzac or Gustave Flaubert, who aimed at a realistic representation of social milieus. How the representation of reality in literary texts corresponds to a "non-verbal reality" (Morris 5) largely depends on how we define reality. So reality itself may be a questionable concept for Charles Pierce (1839-1914) who states that "people cannot attain absolute certainty concerning questions of fact" ( Pierce qtd. in Scholes 8).

Margaret Atwood agrees "that what we consider real is also imagined" and so "every life lived is also an inner life, a life created" (Atwood *Negotiating* 7). Furthermore, Linda Hutcheon asks which reality we refer to in literature and if we consider reality as being futile and only contained in unreliable thought (Hutcheon *History* 172). We might find the answer paying attention to Doris Lessing's confession of the excitements about writing:

> Some people I write about come out of my life. Some, well, I don't know where they come from. They just spring from my own consciousness, perhaps the subconscious, and I'm surprised as they emerge. [...] Someone says something, drops a phrase, and later you find that phrase turning into a character in a story, or a single, isolated, insignificant incident becomes the germ of a plot. (Newquist 15)

However, it is difficult to give just one answer to this philosophical issue (reality versus literature) and I think it still remains an interesting one for postmodern writers. We can only examine how writers handle this problematic issue in their prose, language being their only medium of expression.

### 1.2.2 Realism, Modernism and Postmodernism

Robert Scholes states that "we are in touch with reality in some way" (10). In the previous section I have considered the representation of reality in fiction, i. e. in created and written texts. We can assume that language is the primary medium which mediates between reality and fiction. But "how exactly does language hook onto reality?" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 171). "Does the linguistic sign refer to an actual object – in literature, historiography, ordinary language? [...] Can any linguistic reference be unmediated and direct?" (171). Currie realises that the assumption that "all fiction employs the medium of language" is "drastically simplified" (2), but this statement is employed as a starting point for his own analysis of fictionality.

In literary studies we often speak of "verbal and visual representation" (Morris 9) and if we want to analyse works of prose, we have to assume that language is indispensable to representation. In this thesis I am concerned with the early works of Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing in which language, however it may operate as a medium, stands between invention and "actual" reality. [1]

Fiction, being an invention, has lent its name to the literary genre of fiction. The novel is generally perceived as providing the largest space for the construction of complex plots and characters. For Margaret Atwood the novel makes it possible "to build a larger structure" (Atwood qtd. in Ingersoll 1) and due to the fact that it enables the writer to tell a made-up story, it was less respected than other genres for that reason.

In 1712 Eustace Budgell wrote for *The Spectator*:

> I shall also advise my fair Readers to be in a particular manner careful how they meddle with Romances, Chocolate, Novels, and the like Inflamers, which I look upon as very dangerous [. . .]. (Budgell, *The Spectator*)

Virginia Woolf begins her essay, entitled "The Art of Fiction" with the thought that "[...] fiction is a lady and a lady who has somehow got herself into trouble [...]'" (Woolf *Art* 599). "In England, at any rate, the novel is not a work of art" because "fiction is not to be taken seriously" (Woolf *Art* 603). Atwood often quotes Plato's opinion that poets are liars, therefore she also regards herself as a 'licensed liar' (Atwood qtd. in Ingersoll 244). Because this genre of fiction has been mistrusted ever since, the nineteenth century writers attempted to design their novels as realistically as possible. So, the nineteenth century

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[1] Ruth Ronen uses the term actual to refer to all that is not fictional, for example "the actual world".

gave rise to the "traditional realistic novel" (Defoe, Richardson or Fielding), the authors of which:

> assume that there is an extra-literary reality which may be verbally communicated, and that it is possible and indeed valid to create self-sustaining fictional universes existing on the basis of analogy with experiential reality. (Sauerber 1)

Moreover, Sauerber considers traditional realism to be an expression of the fictional universe that renders verbally "an intrinsically coherent analogy to a reality which is seen to exist 'out there' for us to take in and for our imagination to work on against the background of our general experience" (3).

Virginia Woolf has strongly criticised this kind of objective realism, especially the sort of reality that was regarded as conveyable. In *Modern Fiction,* she attempted to define and place within history the "modern" writing of her day. She not only assesses modern fiction, but makes a distinction between the "materialists," the solid, popular writers of her times and the "spiritualists," those experimental writers who are looking for "reality" in unconventional ways and who are collectively known nowadays as modernists. For Woolf reality was more than the material world; therefore, she objected to the materialistic attitude of many writers:

> Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous hub, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to end. (Woolf, "Modern Fiction", 106)

Modernist fiction, which reached its peak in the 1920s, "called in doubt the concept of a stable reality, reflecting instead the mental process of the perception itself as the proper reality" (Sauerberg 2). Auerbach observes that by this time "the writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished" (Auerbach 534). We can also speak of a "shift of focus from external to internal reality" (Sauerberg 2) because "almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae" (Auerbach 534).

However, modernists believe that reality, either material or psychological, is elusive, complex, multiple and understandable, but, on the other hand, they still claim that the purpose of their art is "to convey knowledge, by some new aesthetic means, of that intangibility." In this context, "their quarrel with realism" seems to be "predominantly an aesthetic and epistemological one" (Morris 17).

Finally postmodernist writers rejected both "realist and modernist [...] aesthetics" as Sauerberg underlines (2):

Postmodernist writers tend to focus either on 'reality' in a state not to be processed because already edited or processed before the literary imagination gets to work, or on the act of writing itself, and to problematize any authorial or textual authority. (2)

In respect of the postmodern fiction, the American critic Brian McHale (*Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987) argues that the move from modern to postmodern fiction is meant to be a change in terms of focusing: epistemological issues are replaced by an exploration of ontological questions. Actually, he means that while modernist fiction asks about how a world can be interpreted or changed, and is interested in questions of truth and knowledge, such as epistemology, postmodern fiction raises questions about the very status of reality and the world: "What is the world? What kind of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kind of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" (10) In other words, according to McHale postmodern fiction challenges the readers with questions about what sort of world is being created at each moment in the text, and who or what in a text they can believe or rely on (Malpas 24).

Continuing this idea, Gerhard Hoffman explains what kind of worlds the postmodern fiction is concerned with: "Though the postmodern fictional worlds are obviously "fantastic", the problem is, what is fantastic, and how such worlds are built?" (17). Endorsing McHale's view, he states that "[b]eing indeed worlds, they apparently are constructed as such, i.e., by forming situations and sequences of situations. They share components like space, time, characters, actions or events with the "real" world and "realistic" fiction, even though they are all marked by the deconstructive turn and, after the breakdown of representational schemes, are used to playfully reconstruct new worlds out of old ones" (18).

In brief, whereas modernist narrative is nourished by "the epistemological dominant" which is the desire to know, "postmodern narrative is grounded in the 'ontological dominant,' the exploration of a world in which issues of truth and knowability are destined to remain indeterminate" (McHale 32).

The epistemological element manifests itself in the metafictional discourse which represents a mode of writing that "questions the very conventions of realistic as well as modernist fiction and proceeds to problematize the sufficiency of language itself. It works by playing well-established literary elements against each other in order to demonstrate the artificial nature of narrative" (Sauerberg 2).

"What is metafiction and why are they saying such awful things about it?" Patricia Waugh asks her readers in a her book *Metafiction: The Theory*

*and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (Waugh 2 ), then offering a description of the concerns and the characteristics of this term:

> Metafiction is a term given to a fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship of fiction to reality. (Waugh 2)

Actually, Waugh claims that such writings not only examine the fundamental structure of the narrative fiction, but they also explore the fictionality of any representation of the external world. Two oppositions are viewed here: the world of fiction versus the world outside the fiction. Accordingly, metafiction can be described as an elastic term covering a wide range of fictions, such as "those novels at one end of the spectrum which take fictionality as a theme to be explored . .. whose formal self-consciousness is limited" ( 18). Moreover, this spectrum consists of

> those texts that manifest the symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but allow their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized or 'naturalized' and given a total interpretation ... Finally, at the furthest extreme that, in rejecting realism more thoroughly, they posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions, ... (Waugh 19)

With respect to the quotation above, I think that the author's intention is to highlight the fact that metafictional works are those which "explore a theory of writing fiction through the practice of writing fiction" (Waugh 2). This argument is also fostered by Mark Currie's idea on current metafiction's self-critical tendency. His definition refers to a sort of "borderline discourse, a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, which takes the border as its subject" (Currie 2). At the same time, Currie admits that there are certain works that display very few metafictional features by noting that "to see the dramatized narrator or novelist as metanarrative devices is to interpret a substantial proportion of fiction as meta-fiction" (Currie 4).

Actually, metafiction poses questions through its formal self-exploration drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as book. Consequently, if our knowledge of the world is now perceived as being mediated through language, then literary fiction becomes a useful model of learning about the construction of reality itself. This view is aptly described by Waugh below:

> Language is an independent self-contained system which generates its own meaning. Its relation with the phenomenal world is highly complex, problematic and regulated by convention. Meta-terms, therefore, are required in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers. (Waugh 16)

Practically, if the writer sets out to represent the world, then he/ she should realize that the world as such cannot be represented. They can only represent the 'discourses' of that world. Within such a context, we should pay more attention to the process of writing, particularly to its instrumental 'metalanguage' which is a term developed by Louis Hjelmslev: "Metalanguage, which instead of referring to non-linguistic events, situations or objects in the world, refers to another language: it is a language that takes another as its object" (Waugh 4). In Saussure's terms, a 'metalanguage' is a language that functions as a signifier to another language, and this other language becomes its signified.

Discussing the metafictional aspects relevant to my research, such as intertextuality, particularly parody, and language as an arbitrary system, we remark that in Lessing's and Atwood's early novels, the representation of "feminine selflessness" (Modleski 74) provides a critique of patriarchy while leaving women space for self-invention. Subsequently, love seems to be a sort of illusion for such characters as Kate Brown in The Summer before the Dark, Joan Foster in Lady Oracle or Marian MacAlpin in The Edible Woman: they all come to the conclusion that prone to a consuming love, women annihilate their own selves by denying those aspects of their femininity which do not resonate with masculine desire.

As for the process of writing, it is the problematic relationship between fiction and the real world that is intensely explored. So, I think it is correct to sustain that metafiction pays attention to particular conventions of the novel by which the process of its construction is displayed. Novels attempt to create alternative linguistic structure or fictions which imply the old forms by encouraging the reader to draw on his or her knowledge of traditional literary conventions when struggling to construct a meaning of the new text.

For instance, in *The Golden Notebook*, the dreams are points of intensity and fusion: Anna Wulf, the protagonist of the novel, sees fragments – a lump of earth from Africa, metal from a gun used in Indochina, flesh from people killed in the Korean War, a Communist party badge from someone who died in a Soviet prison – all of which represent crises in contemporary life. In this context, Doris Lessing interferes and explains "the unconscious artist who resides in our depths is a very economical individual. With a few symbols a dream can define the whole of one's life, and warn us of the future, too. Anna's dreams contain the essence of her experience in Africa, her fears of war, her relationship to Communism, her dilemma as a writer." (Raskin 26).

Cultural production is achieved within a social context and an ideology and displays particular features. If the personal is political, then the traditional separation between private and public history must be considered, as feminists

have done. They have reconsidered both the context of historic narrative and the politics of representation.

I do not think it a mistake to consider Postmodernism as a complementary and sustaining force in feminist theory and politics. Against the absolute, unitary conception of knowledge, the postmodernists propose a system of discourses that are historical and contextual. Such a discourse theory demands a new way of conceptualizing truth and political action that breaks down dualistic categorizations.

My analysis goes on with the concept of textual reference world. This term is conceived as a reader construct, created through shared, interpersonal, and recognizable reading operations and mediated by the codified conventional context on which the operations depend. Regarding the traditional narrative fiction, the reader   perceives the reference world as a preexisting one as if the narrative signifying discourse refers to that world.

The criteria for truth matching with the reference world are built on the correspondence theory by which truth is assessed in the real world, the reference world temporarily replacing the actual world as referent and context for truth. Thus, we actually take for granted that such a world exists. But as an independent mental construct the reference world acts as a separating element between reality and the fictional world and preserves the autonomy of that world by placing its isolation in a new truth context (Charles  236).

It is in this context that the philosophical reference problems are solved and the metaphysical relationships between words and imagined reality are established. Consequently, the reference world provides the right context  for a successful reference.

May Charles refers to a certain type of knowledge that makes reference both possible and meaningful and that results in the construction of more complete fictional truth beyond the typical epistemological indeterminacy of fiction. Accordingly, the reference world implies "the crucial intersection of extra- and intertextuality with fictional worlds, the reader implementing the text-external knowledge bases of world models, text models, and intertextual repertoire" (Charles 237).

Marie -Laure Ryan also postulates such a world as a mental construct noting that the reader can inscribe himself/ herself there. Consequently, fictional characters can take on a more comprehensive existence corresponding to certain intuitions about their participation in reality and the reader's emotional responses to their situations. Not only do readers imaginatively place themselves in  the reference world in which characters 'play their role' , they may also  'interact' with them on a perceived-as-equal ontological footing (Ryan 138).

The reference world is shaped in our mind and it often depicts the life story of the traditional fictional characters as if they were ontologically complete persons with selfhood and destiny. In this world, the reader also has the difficult role to fill in gaps and to motivate psychologically the characters' actions. Obviously, he/she attributes to fictional characters an existence that only membership in such an imagined 'ontologically actual world' can provide. Moreover, this context allows them an existential dimension which would be otherwise denied.

On the other hand, the fictional characters' authenticity results from their undeniable bond with real-world truths. It is relevant here Atwood's strategy of using a wide range of ordinary people to carry her stories: university students, museum workers, market researchers, writers, illustrators, and even housemaids. Almost all characters experience episodes of their life "in a virtual Garden of Eden setting, replete with untamed natural environments. Exploring shorelines, gazing at stars, gathering rocks, and listening to waves, they are solitary souls, but not lonely individuals: innocent, curious, and affable creatures" (Goldblatt 275). In *Surfacing,* the unnamed narrator remembers "idyllic days unfolded in a land of lakes, berries, and animals" (275). At the same time, Atwood also builds up protagonists with unhappy backgrounds suggesting "an unhealthy, weedy soil that causes their young plants to twist and permutate." (275) So, in *Lady Oracle* we have Joan Foster who, suffering from anxiety due to her domineering mother and fighting against obesity, tries to find emotional satisfaction away from her family. Similarly, Lesje in *Life Before Man*, also cannot detach herself from some childhood experiences and is unable to develop self-confidence when choosing to withdraw mentally in the solid world of dinosaurs.

In postulating the ontological completeness of characters in the reference world, May Charles notes, the reader builds their epistemological completeness through reading operations and including "all truths activated textually," not only "those directly asserted and those logically inferred but also those not in any sense told: that is, the vast number of untold facts that contribute to the imagining of an ontologically complete world" (239). Subsequently, the reference world, conceived as "a kind of reality thought to preexist textual stipulation" proves to be more comprehensive than the fictional world created at the level of the text, including "the relevant text-external knowledge that we do not "turn off" when we open fictional narrative texts." Eventually, the reference world serves the purpose of understanding "how that knowledge is applied selectively and combined in accordance with the available text model." (239)

When analyzing the ontological completeness of characters in the reference world, May Charles actually tries to determine to what extent the text model of radical postmodern fiction provides the most extreme challenge to