Doris Lessing's Eccentric Old Women

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Abstract: *The aim of the present contribution is to introduce, analyze and discuss a short story by Doris Lessing (1919–2013), which is capable of surprising the reader with its unconventionality. The short story title is "The Grandmothers" (2003), but the two women protagonists are nothing but a pale portrait of stereotypical elderly women. Ageing, gender and sex create such an eccentric discourse, in this piece of prose, which is able to subvert any predictable thematization of the story. The framework of ageing studies is not necessarily enough to explain the text, it is rather more appropriate to discuss the concept of "juvenescence", as elaborated by American scholar Robert Pogue Harrison (2014), in order to critically frame the short story.*

Keywords: *Doris Lessing; grandmothers; juvenescence; ageing; eternal youth*

The aim of the present contribution is to introduce, analyze and discuss a short story by Doris Lessing (1919–2013), which is capable of surprising the reader with its unconventionality. The short story title is *The Grandmothers* (2003), but the two women protagonists are nothing but a pale portrait of stereotypical elderly women. Ageing, gender and sex create such an eccentric discourse, here, which is able to subvert any predictable thematization of the story. The framework of ageing studies is not necessarily enough to explain the text, it is rather more appropriate to discuss

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The protagonists of the novella are two women, who do not allow any stereotype to touch them, particularly "stereotypical beliefs which make old age, sexual attractiveness and, thus, interest in sex, utterly incompatible" (Oró Piqueras 2019: 85). In a nutshell, the two women reciprocally "fall in love" with the other's young son. Their eccentric life experiment, or life experience, shakes and undermines normative meanings of home and family quite seriously (Watkins 2007), while strongly questioning aging, per sé. In relation with the two women protagonists, rather than age, ageing or ageism, it is rather more appropriate to resort to the category of "sexy oldie" (Gott 2005: 23).

The novella later became a drama Film, entitled *Adoration*, popularly known as *Adore,* directed by Anne Fontaine in 2013, which was presented both at Sundance Film Festival and at the 57th BFI London Film Festival. Although discussing the film and the adaptation is out of the scope of this contribution, only one annotation might suffice here: The two (grand)mothers look much younger in the film, whereas in the short story they already have grandchildren and are in their sixties.

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Doris Lessing, Nobel Prize winner for Literature, in 2007, is well-known for her long-lasting career as activist, as a member of the Communist party, as a voice in the anti-nuclear campaign, but above all, as anti-apartheid and feminist writer. Not by chance, the motivation for the Nobel Prize reads: "that epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny."[2] Last but not least, besides being among the first sci-fi women-writers with her five volumes of space fictions, *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979–1983), she was a pioneer writing about old age, when it was not jet a fashionable topic. In *Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983), she created the character of an old and decrepit woman, Maudie Fowler,

2 Cf. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2007/lessing/facts/.

with touches of gothic (Goldman 2017: 216–237), describing her almost as a witch in a fairy tale, living in a dark cave of a London basement, with neither proper electricity nor heating, yet capable of enchanting a career woman in her fifties thanks to her storytelling. This well-known novel can be considered a classic in coming of age literature; an emblematic novel about ageing in the twentieth century; more precisely, of women ageing, and, above all, voicing the invisibility of elderly people in our modern city life and city scape.

Thus, Maudie Fowler is the embodiment of the mythical and iconographic "crone" described by Barbara Walker in her homonymous essay (1985; Concilio 2001: 128). When Jane Somers spots her in a London Chemistry, she believes she sees "an old witch. I was staring at this old creature and thought, a witch. […] A tiny bent-over woman, with a nose nearly meeting her chin, in black heavy dusty clothes" (Lessing 1983: 20). Maudie has got fierce blue eyes and characteristically always says "NO" to anyone and to any imposed rule, including medicaments. Moreover, also characteristically, she is extremely slow. Thus, when Jane has to slow down her pace and her life's rhythm, she is suddenly conscious of what she has expunged from her sight:

> I thought how I rushed along the pavements every day and had never seen Mrs Fowler, but she lived near me, and suddenly I looked up and down the streets and saw – old women. Old men too, but mostly old women. They walked slowly along. They stood in pairs or groups, talking. Or sat on the bench at the corner under the plane tree. I had not seen them. That was because I was afraid of being like them. (Lessing 1983: 21)

In this passage Doris Lessing voices "ageism" in its form of social indifference, to the point that elderly people are actually invisible to the gaze of the passers-by. Lessing's feminist engagement is here evident, for she is indirectly quoting Simone de Beauvoir, who, in her essay *The Coming of Age* (1996 [1970]), denounced our modern "conspiracy of silence", erasure and concealment (De Beauvoir 1996: 2). Thus, one way to recover the elderly from marginality is to portray the old woman as a transfigured modern Mother Goddess, or Great Mother of ancient times, partic-

ularly for feminist writers and thinkers. The "crone" according to Barbara Walker gives back empowerment to old women, otherwise neglected. What is the power of old age, then? Simone de Beauvoir (1996) claims it is lived experience, whereas to the eyes and the gaze of onlookers, old age is only a perception, a cognition.

A similar conclusion is reached by Robert Pogue Harrison, who claims that "modern Western societies, especially in the United States, have institutionalized age segregation by confining the young to educational institutions, adults to the workplace, and the elderly to retirement homes. Consequently the generations spend most of their time alongside rather than with one another" (Harrison 2014: 63). We might parenthetically add that Covid-19 has exasperated this aspect of "living along" rather than "with" the elderly. This "apartheid", Harrison goes on saying, "deprives elderly of their mentorship roles, deprives the young of a sense of larger kinship, and deprives families of 'generativity,' which in more traditional societies fosters dialogue and interaction between the various age groups" (Harrison 2014: 63).

In this context, I would like to focus on this concept of "generativity", for it is precisely pivotal in Lessing's novel. Generativity is defined as "transmission of legacies from one generation to another within the domestic sphere, leading to the mutual 'embeddedness' of those who inhabit it" (Harrison 2014: 63). The reason why the protagonist of Lessing's novel, Jane Somers, is so fascinated and mesmerized by Maudie Fowler is Maudie's storytelling. This is the gift she receives from the old woman: that is to say, a bunch of stories about life in London in the 1940s and 1950s, that Jane cannot avoid listening to and craving for. This cements the strange friendship between a 50 years-old journalist and a woman on the verge of death, whose only testament and legacy is an unavoidable and inexhaustible narrative flow. Perhaps, just another version of the ancient Mother Goddess's "generativity".

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Doris Lessing, however, also wrote a very original type of story in *The Grandmothers* (2003). As already hinted at, never title could be more mis-

leading. We expect – perhaps stereotypically enough – grandmothers to be women in their seventies, with a halo of whitish hair, and a strong sense of responsibility, particularly in relation to their grandchildren. On the contrary, here very atypical grandmothers are presented, for the two women protagonists and their sons are entangled in quasi-incestuous relations. If title and thematic content converge in creating an experimental piece of writing, the genre of this novella also introduces a novelty. Side by side with *Buildungsroman*, by which it is possible to describe the two young men's evolution from children to married husbands and fathers, Lessing introduced the genre of *Reifungsroman* (or, novel of ripening), mentioned in Oro Piqueras' study (2019: 89), which describes the two women's progress towards old age. This seems to confirm what critic Susan Watkins wrote about the fact that "Lessing's interest in formal experimentation tends to operate at the level of genre and narrative perspective" (2007: 247). Picking up from this consideration, Watkins also notices how innovation and experimentation in Lessing does not involve so much syntax, but rather "manipulation of free-indirect discourse and performative play with the idea of 'omniscence'" (2007: 247). In particular, she claims that in the short story the main difficulty is finding the appropriate vocabulary to define the two women's sexual and emotional life, as in the following example, where they "need to be told", rather than being able to tell for themselves:

> "Roz, did Harold say that we are lezzies?"
> "Well, we aren't, are we?" enquired Lil, apparently needing to be told.
> "Well, I don't think we are," said Roz. (Lessing 2003: 17–18)

The setting of the story is a protected bay in Australia, named after a legendary, lonesome seaman, Baxter, whose boat crashed against the seven black rocks that prevent the open ocean to enter the idyllic gulf. This is a colonial exotic paradise, of sun, sea and summer – under a sky that was so different from the British sky – only vaguely reminiscent of ancient, hospitable and peaceful Aborigines, now peopled by blond-haired and blue-eyed, healthy, tanned and sporty people, who look like happy tourists all their life.

In particular this is the portrait of the family of the protagonists. A happy, shining and beautiful family, when looked at, with envy, by the waitress who serves them a healthy breakfast of fresh fruit juice and wholebread sandwiches. She was enchanted in looking at *the family*. *That family* was her passion. But, as Susan Watkins notices:

In this story, the family seems to be a rigid structure which is in no way flexible enough to incorporate the idea of middle-aged women's sexual and emotional intimacy with younger men, much less the suggestion that this intimacy is connected in some way to their intimacy with each other. Whether or not the family should be capable of containing mother son incest is a question that also exists as an uncomfortable resonance. (2007: 250)

Like the institution of the family, also home is a problematic category, for it might become synonym with violence and unspoken secrets, inclusion and exclusion, where "Membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control […] They are places of violence and nurturing" (Watkins 2007: 250; George 1996: 9).

First the husbands, later the daughters-in-law feel excluded from the quartet of mothers and sons, who create a sort of enclosed family. Even Tom, one of the boys, while visiting his by now divorced father, claims to feel free "up here", while feeling entrapped and imprisoned "down there" (Lessing 2003: 37), meaning his mother's and his friends' home. Therefore, also the concept of motherhood and ageing undergo a twisting and bending which is quite unusual. The age of the two women protagonists is about sixty, but the story develops retrospectively and is narrated by an omniscient narrator.

Yet, what is age exactly? How can it define a person's identity?

> My body is at once sixty years old and several billion years old, since all of its atoms originated a few seconds after the Big Bang, hence are as old as the universe itself. Moreover, a body does not age uniformly in all its parts. The age of a weak heart is not that of a sound kidney. One may turn old in one part of the body and not in another over the course of years. As John Banville's protagonist remarks about his Italian neighbors in the novel *Shroud*: "They age from the top down, for

> these are still the legs… they must have had in their twenties or even earlier" (2014: 3–4). In sum, the body too is heterochronic. (Harrison 2014: 8)

Each individual is representative of this heterochronicity, of multiple times, condensed, some more visible or prominent than others, as Banville underlines, by noticing "youthful legs" in Italian elderly people.

The story's title, *The Grandmothers*, creates a short circuit in the identification of the two protagonists. If both fictional and scientific literature seem to generally agree with those who "recognize the 'grandmother' as one of the very few accepted female literary images in old age" (Oró Piqueras 2019: 88), here the grandmothers shatter this reassuring portrait. Lessing's story is one which includes heterochronicity, at least in the relationship between the social and familiar role of the grandmothers and their biological age. The novella's genesis is a story that an old man once told the writer as worth narrating, as Doris Lessing claims in an interview:

The Grandmothers was told to me some years ago by a man who has been a friend of the two boys, and who envied them and wished he was in their place. But when he approached older women the response was usually on the lines of "Run along, sonny." The convention is that boys are the prey of lustful older women, but usually it is the youngsters who approach the older women. And it is nearly always the older women who end it. But conventional morality has to have its say. I was struck by how the man telling me this tale repeated, again and again, that the women had been cruel to the end of the affairs. I kept asking him, "But what did you think could happen?" They were in their early fifties by then, and they were right to end it before they got too old. But he couldn't see it. "They were all so happy," he kept saying. His view of the thing as ten years of unmitigated bliss did rather influence the writing. Though my view of the story was darker than his. Life seldom comes up with ten years

of perfect bliss. This man, my informant, was very funny: he was much older, and was putting past heartaches into perspective.[3]

This is a good piece of narrative, but why? Susan Watkins provides a suggestion, perhaps it is because this short story presents "women's sexuality and reproduction", and more in general "relationships outside the sanction of the patriarchal family" (2007: 249). Moreover, it is a story about how not to accept ageing passively and inertly, on the part of women. It is the story of two female's whimsical, eccentric, and brazen refusal of coming of age. Thus, when "Brennan and Hepworth argue that the main reasons why the figure of the grandmother remains an accepted image of female ageing is the fact that she is devoid of sexual implications; her role being mainly that of carer and emotional support when needed in the family" (Oró Piqueras 2019: 88–89), they might not be farther away from Lessing's daring imagination.

In the short story, the two boys in their twenties embody Apollonian beauty, while the two mothers incarnate Juno-like, mature beauty. Roz has divorced from her husband, right because her relationship with her best friend, Lil, is so pervasive and invasive, that they hint at being lesbians. Lil is a widow. Both their young boys suffer in different ways for the loss of their fathers. They end up in bed with their mother's best friend, partly to find consolation and maternal cocooning, partly as a safe initiation rite to sexual life with an intimate person, and partly as a vacation from life's responsibility, in a mockery of ancient Greek myths, where Gods and Goddesses descended on Earth to seduce mortals for their own leisure and recreation.

The resort, where they live, seems characterized by an a-temporal summertime: the time of eternal youth, at least according to the tradition in Shakespeare, who identified the summer with youth and the winter with old age.

In Sonnet n. 2 winter is a metaphor for old age, it is seen as an enemy besieging beauty, and the wrinkles in old age are seen as trenches in a battlefield:

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3 Cf. https://b0f646cfbd7462424f7a-f9758a43fb7c33cc8adda0fd36101899.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/book-interviews/BI-9780060530112.pdf.

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
Will be a tattered weed, of small worth held.
(Shakespeare 1966: 3; n.2, ll. 1–4)

In Sonnet n. 18, famously Shakespeare mentions summer. In its opening line, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (Shakespeare 1966: 11; n.18, l. 1), the mysterious Fair Youth is compared to the summer season for his ripen beauty. More relevantly, perhaps, Sonnet n. 5 does neither mention the Fair Youth, nor the marriage that might preserve his beauty in his children, but speaks rather of a beauty that transcends time and decadence, and is preserved almost forever. Thus, the last lines declare:

Then were not summer's distillation left,
A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft,
Nor it, nor no remembrance what it was:
But flowers distilled, though they with winter meet,
Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet.
(Shakespeare 1966: n.5, ll. 9–14)

This idea, of a beauty that transcends the effects of time, is the status, the suspended atmosphere in which the quartet of Lessing's protagonists live. Their happiness has not so much to do with physical countenance but with the bliss of the prolonged moment. The two mothers' beauty is extra-temporal. The two couples do not live immorally, but a-morally in a hedonistic reality, where beauty is intrinsic in the situation of shared bliss of juvenescence and not so much in the carnal incident per sé, immersed as they all are in summer time, swimming and sun-bathing, always laying on the sea-shore like mermaids, as if in a never-ending holiday from life and responsibility.

Socially, the two women's way to procrastinate winter and old age strongly questions morality, social norms and common sense. Their love challenges "normative understanding" of love, gender and sexuality (Oró Piqueras 2019: 90) it is almost incestuous and endogamous, for

it pertains to the domestic sphere; the friend's son is a substitute for the missing husband and at the same time mirrors, as in a twinship, their own child. Besides being ever present, consoling, and sheltering neighbors, both women have always been like second mothers to the boys. Their love is scandalous not only because they are mature women having sex with much younger men, but also because they keep the boys in their houses, thus preventing them from exogamous relationships. An aggravating element in this dangerous relationship is that they favor neoteny. In a sense the two mothers pursue rejuvenation, while the two boys are not allowed to abandon childhood entirely, and persist in protracted youth and dependence, as in:

> "Fetalization theory": humans are basically juvenile apes whose natural development (into adult apes) has been indefinitely retarded. Thanks to this retardation, humans remain "paedomorphic," or child-like in form, throughout their entire lives. (Harrison 1983: 17)

The two boys in the story are like child-apes. Although here Oedipus's myth is evoked, or better Lessing seems to produce an anti-Oedipus, for the boys have to symbolically kill the father, that is to say, acknowledge and come to terms with his absence, then they sleep with their substitute mothers not to kill them as in the classical myth, but right on the contrary to remain in that oedipal, child-like, or ape-like idyll for as long as possible. Literally they embody "Man, in his bodily development, a primate fetus that has become sexually mature" (Harrison 1983: 17).

Eventually, they get married and have their own children, two girls, loved by their grandmothers. Yet, the mother-son bond persists in the love letters that one of the boys has been writing, although not always sending, till then, to one of the women, thus creating an unacceptable scandal to the eyes of his young wife.

Here, the grandmothers preserve their juvenescence rather than accepting their ageing, proclaiming sexual rights also for ageing women. In this story, Lessing touches on another social taboo, that is having a young lover for a mature woman. This is something that is socially stigmatized, much more than a mature man having a younger female partner.

This prejudice is another case of ageism, a discrimination against older women who gain power over younger males, whereas older men are admired for patronizing over younger partners. If, on the one hand, "With this highly suggestive short story Lessing blurs the boundaries of time between the older women and the younger men, and, thus, ageing and the Western limitations attached to the ageing body" (Oró Piqueras 2019: 94), on the other hand, the story ends when the two women put an end to it. Suddenly, they seem to recover their wisdom, almost becoming old and wise. Yet, Doris Lessing admits that "they were right ending it before they got too old". She, too, seems unable to believe fully in her invention. She retreats from the very eccentricity she produced, in the end withdrawing her pawns from the game. This might be an autobiographical trait, for Doris Lessing herself, in spite of being a clever woman, an intellectual and an activist, admired by peer artists, refused to engage in a late love-affair, for she believed she was just too old.

Anyway, the writer did not dare to stretch the consequences of her own plot to the extreme. Elderly women in the end retreat in their right place within the family and within society. And only at the very end of the short story, the two women become real Grandmothers, although by now the two daughters-in-law threaten to prevent them from seeing their grandchildren ever again, as a form of extreme revenge. In this case, the generation gap seems inevitably to widen, and the family idyll is shattered.

After all, Doris Lessing's would-be adoptive daughter, Genny Diski provides a portrait of the artist as a withdrawing woman:

> She had had two serious affairs, with Clancy Sigal, an American writer … The other affair was with a psychiatrist from the Maudsley who, she said, had been the love of her life, but who was married and not prepared to leave his wife. When I arrived there, there were a few one-night stands and weekends away with new men she met, […] she seemed rather to have withdrawn or to be withdrawing from the idea of a settled relationship with a lover. […] She explained that a son should not be a witness to his mother's sex life. Six years later, at her fiftieth birthday party, she told me that she was not going to have sex

> any more. At her age it was demeaning to trail a younger man around, and there didn't seem to be any available and interesting old men. In any case, her interest in that sort of things was over. (Diski 2016: 85)

We might say that Doris Lessing did experiment in writing what she would not dare to put to the test in real life. After all, she surrendered to social conventions and standardized behavior, which define the role of women, particularly of elderly women, socially and culturally. She died at ninety-four, in 2013, having written remarkable works on old age and grandmothers, but still bringing with her the secret formula of happy ageing, unless we consider her storytelling as her gift to humanity, her contribution to "generativity", a legacy that comes from the past but looks straight into our future.

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