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# Family Album, Memory and Autobiography: Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*

**Abstract:** *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*, the two volumes of Doris Lessing's autobiography, contain photographs from the author's collection. The images, about thirty in each of the books, may be viewed as her family albums, which she inspects in the acts of remembering and reinterpreting the past. In retrospect, Lessing sees her crucial life-choices and her artistic, intellectual and political positions as shaped both by major historical processes occurring during her life-time (colonialism, the world wars, Communism) and by her ambivalent emotional attitudes to her immediate environment (her family and personal relationships). Whereas individual photographs, which accord with middle class aesthetics and ethics (Bourdieu), communicate stories of family integration, the memoirs challenge such an interpretation of the images and reflect the author's striving to liberate herself from her family and the values they cultivated.

This paper seeks to explore Lessing's articulations and visualizations of her multiple identities, her relatedness to her significant others and her use of photographs as a narrative strategy and as a means of interrogating her cultural situatedness.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing, memoir, photographs

In the 1990s, after decades of writing autobiographical fiction and short pieces of non-fiction, Doris Lessing turned to contractual autobiography and published two volumes of memoirs — *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949–1962* (1997). The first memoir deals with her childhood and youth, first in Persia, then in Southern Rhodesia; the second volume chronicles her life in England after her return from Africa until the early 1960s when, with the publication of *The Golden Notebook* (1962), she received international acclaim. Included into the memoirs are photographs — her family's, her own and others' portraits, snapshots and vernacular photos are neatly organized into temporal and spatial sequences and thematic groups.


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In *Under My Skin*, the images trace the trajectories of Lessing's family: from England to Persia — her birthplace — to England again, and then to Southern Rhodesia, where the family settled on a farm. There are also a few photographs of a genealogical nature presenting Lessing's grandparents, parents, husbands and children, interspersed with snapshots of everyday life and festive occasions. The images, loaded with personal and cultural content, appear as "declarative" cadences (York 1994: 650) and are saturated with discourses evoking specific historical, social and political contexts. For instance, the first page of the album shows Lessing's parents before they got married: a visiting-card sized portrait of her father, and an oval-shaped portrait of her mother in her youth. The two images are coupled with a photograph taken in a hospital room, where Lessing's father was recovering after having a leg amputated due to a shrapnel wound. In the picture, he is lying in a hospital bed and is assisted by a nurse sitting in an armchair next to him and doing her needlework. Despite the dramatic circumstances under which the photo was taken, the atmosphere in the room appears relaxed, almost homelike, and suggests a close bond between the patient and his carer — his future wife — nursing him back to health. The very arrangement of the images on the page, with their cultural and historical contexts, implies a story of the parents' acquaintance, their growing emotional attachment and subsequent marriage.

The sequence that follows brings photographs from Persia. Their content and aesthetics evoke the life-style of the English middle-class colonials. Among the pictures, there is a typical family portrait with an infant, which shows the proud father looking at his wife, who is holding their daughter in a loving embrace. There is also a studio portrait of Doris Lessing as a three-year-old girl, dressed up for the occasion and posing with a teddy. Several other snapshots show children at play and commemorate social occasions, such as a fancy dress Christmas party of the Lessings' friends in Teheran in 1923. The photos capture the atmosphere of the family and their friends' life away from England but cultivating their customs and traditions.

The African chapter of the album in *Under My Skin* begins with images that depict the family on their farm in Southern Rhodesia. The pictures document subsequent stages of the construction of the house and the adjoining buildings as well as the ploughing of the fields. The construction of the house and cultivation of the land appear, however, not merely as the family's individual history, but as a sort of chronicle of European settlers' translocation to the colonies (Rosner 1999: 61, 64).[1] In contact zones, photos often celebrated the establishment of settlements, which was part of the process of the colonial expansion of the white middle class (Smith 1994: 527). As the sequences of photographs that follow imply, Lessing's family strived to lead a middle class life in Southern Rhodesia: snapshots show

[1] Victoria Rosner observes that the architecture of colonial houses reflected the cultural practices of the white settlers (2012: 78) and that spatial organization of their houses and settlements expressed the colonizers' sense of racial and national superiority (2012: 81).


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family picnics, parents posing for portraits with their offspring, children cuddling their pets, Doris Lessing posing in her school uniform.

The images from the period when as a young woman she moved away from the family home to Salisbury (Rhodesia) include her wedding photo with her first husband, Frank Wisdom, and a snapshot of her with her son and daughter, whom she was to abandon when she walked away from the marriage. Next come pictures of her second husband, Gottfried Lessing, and their son Peter — the only child she was to take with her to England. This album closes with a somewhat sentimental snapshot of the thirty-year-old Doris Lessing anticipating her trip to England — her gentle smile and dreamlike eyes suggest that she is ready to start a new chapter in her life.

In *Under My Skin* the photographs related to Lessing's childhood tell a story of family integrity and create an image of cordial harmony between the relatives. Particular photos and their cadences fall in line with what Pierre Bordieu identifies as the middle class aesthetics and ethics: the images commemorate traditional celebrations and leisure activities, and record the children's development and education. Filled with ideological content, such as the concept of family, class status, national identity and gender roles, the photos "refer to the style of social relations favoured by a society" (Bordieu 1990: 83). The album communicates a sense of relatedness and belonging, of deep bonds between the family members, of their unity. What may be read from the photographs is a story of an English family living their lives away from home, but striving to preserve their middle class behaviour patterns and values.

The album in *Walking in the Shade* offers a different selection of images: it does not depict a traditional family, but rather what could be termed a family of choice. While the album features Lessing's mother, children and even ex-husbands, portraits of her lover, friends and acquaintances are also included. There are group photographs related to her political activism, like her journey to the Soviet Union, and snapshots from peace demonstrations in England. Interspersed between sections about her public involvement are domestic scenes with Lessing posing in the kitchens of her houses, but the photos representing her involvement in the public sphere outnumber those with private content.

The album also contains artistic portraits of Doris Lessing from the 1960s, when she gained recognition as a prominent author. It is noteworthy that these pictures, taken by Ida Kar and Mark Gerson, famous London photographers, are excluded from the American edition of the book. This omission is not trivial because it cuts out an important aspect of Lessing's life — her creative life. Whereas the majority of the photos in the album depict her in her public and personal contexts, Kar's and Gerson's portraits, with their artistic stylisation, present Lessing as a literary personage. Needless to say, constitutive for a writer is not only her experience in the ontic reality but also her work — her major source of identifications. Therefore, the exclusion of Kar's and Gerson's portraits from the American


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edition of *Walking in the Shade* as if belittles Lessing's constitutive experience and highlights her private and social-political connections. Because this omission is coupled with other interventions into the visual material in the American edition, one cannot help but think that these changes are aimed at a reading market which craves for sensational stories about the famous as ordinary people and not necessarily about their artistic achievement. For instance, one of Lessing's "kitchen" portraits of an artistic character is cropped in the American edition and, due to the cropping, it loses its artistic dimension and resembles other snapshots with a domestic setting, where Lessing looks like an "ordinary" housewife. Besides, one sequence with Lessing's abandoned children is rearranged too. The English edition sequence, where the children's images are placed next to a portrait of Lessing's psychoanalyst — the prototype of Mother Sugar in *The Golden Notebook* — is suggestive of unresolved emotional distress. The American edition grouping implies a story of abandonment of the children for the sake of an attractive social life and thrilling political activity: the children, beside Lessing's second ex-husband and squeezed into one corner of the page, appear as a closed chapter compared to the many photos depicting her partying and public commitments.

In the album in *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing cuts herself off from the middle class in the very first caption, where she declares that she was critical of photography and its social connotations: "I hated being photographed and also we thought that being photographed was really rather petit bourgeois and self-indulgent" (WS, 30[2]). Her ideological stance and contestation of middle-class behaviour show themselves in the content and style of the images: domestic scenes with "kitchen" realism, photos documenting her political involvement and Communist Party affiliation, snapshots related to her single parenting in the 1950s, portraits of her lover and of the abandoned children. All these images break cohesion and subvert the model of a traditional middle class family.

However, despite Lessing's skepticism towards photography and her contestation of middle class culture, she does choose photographs for her auto-representation. In her memoirs the visual material is intertwined with the narrative, which is structured by parallel temporal-geographical patterns and stylized as inspection of photographs as if Lessing were turning the pages of the albums and looking at the images — those included and the missing ones, real pictures and imaginary ones, her "mental snapshots" (US, 97), as she calls them. Many sections of the memoirs appear as captions and contact sheets. Some of them expand into episodes and stories of substantial length; others are compressed or abruptly cut. For instance, when she writes about her relationship with her abandoned children, to which she returns several times in the two volumes, her "captions" are brief, she weights her words

[2] In the article, page references are given to British editions of Lessing's books. In parenthetical references, the following abbreviations of the titles are used: US for *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography*, WS for *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography* and TB for *Time Bites: Views and Reviews*.


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and stops short without explaining her motivation or giving excuses. Naturally, this does not mean that she marginalizes the problem. On the contrary, when she writes that to "leave two small children" was "to commit the unforgivable" (US, 261), she cannot make her judgement more clear. Unlike the bond with the children from her first marriage, to which she refuses to give broader insights, her relationship with her mother is scrutinized at length. Lessing's intense focus on her hostility towards her mother gives these passages the quality of therapeutic discourse where she is trying to work through a difficult, still open problem. The narrative is fragmented in the sense that when she finishes inspecting one image and turns to another, she does not give cohesion to and linkages between the episodes. This arrangement of the verbal text brings to mind discontinuities between the pictures in the albums.

Another element of Lessing's photographic strategy in the verbal narrative is her scrutiny of the images from multiple perspectives as if she were looking at them from different angles. She uses many conventions, styles and tones of voice — from pure fictionalisations to matter-of-fact historical reconstructions to lucid social sketches to casual anecdotes to testimony and confessional disclosure. The changing grammatical tenses and alternating pronouns broaden or narrow the field of vision. The second person pronoun in addresses to readers delineates their perspective;[3] the shifts between "I/she/we" emphasise Lessing's multiple identities and a varying degree of her relatedness to the defining groups. The oscillating distances — temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual and ideological — are produced by narrative techniques and literary stylizations.

However, the verbal narrative in the memoirs does not serve as a supplement to the albums. The relationship between the visual and the verbal is interactive and full of tension. Throughout the memoirs Lessing exposes the falsifying nature of photographs: the stories the images imply, she asserts, are different than her actual experience. She thematises the clash between the pictures on display and their personal meanings. Innocent scenes evoke painful recollections and activate emotions — such as anxiety, distress or unease — that middle class photographic practice tries to eliminate. When Lessing inspects the photos portraying her family as an integrated group, in her commentaries she debunks this idyllic image and recalls her sense of non-belonging, her anger, fear and frustrations. In particular, the memories of her mother triggered by the pictures are full of emotional tension and provoke shocking admissions about the daughter's utter hostility and rejection of her mother. Although in childhood Lessing was more affectionate towards her father, whom in the memoirs she calls her "support and comforter" in her fight

[3] Lynda Scott argues that Lessing uses film imagery for self-representation and "casts herself over and over in different lights, shoots and re-shoots with different angles, and in different situations" (1997). The novelist constructs her auto-narratives with full awareness of the readers' inquisitive and evaluating gaze, "constantly aware of the reader as the audience of her construction and presentation of her self image or images" (Scott 1997).


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against her mother (US, 31), she remembers his firm grip — even at play, at the game of tickling — as an upsetting experience:

> And then the moment when Daddy captures his little daughter … His great hands go to work on my ribs. My screams, helpless, hysterical, desperate. Then tears. But we were being taught how to be good sports. For being a good sport was necessary for the middle class life. To put up with "ragging" and with being hurt, with being defeated in games, being "tickled" until you wept, was a necessary preparation. (US, 31)

Lessing spells out that the father's grip, which had no inappropriate undertones as we might understand this now, filled her nonetheless with repulsion. The closeness of his body, the oudour of his unwashed clothes, the firm embrace that hurt — all that produced fear and resentment in her. She recalls that her parents' touch, contrarily to the positive role usually ascribed to it in the family context, provoked her anxiety. She experienced touch as a violation of her bodily autonomy and psychic integrity, as an invasion of her privacy, as a manifestation of the adults' dominance and brutality.

The photos Lessing inspects in her memoirs make her remember her childhood emotions — her disgust with the adults, with their ugly bodies, their unbearable smell and their physical strength. She writes about her aversion to her crippled father and her lack of sympathy for his condition. The verbal narrative brings to light what cannot be read from the photos, what is concealed and "what remains unphotographable" (Smith, 531). A telling example of the clash between articulations and visualisations is Lessing's response to the hospital photograph of her parents, which shows her mother, a professional nurse, taking care of the recovering soldier, her future husband. Lessing's memory of her mother is not that of a tender nurse, but of a vicious, manipulative person who played medical games to control the family. Another telling example is the photo of the fancy dress Christmas party in Teheran. Lessing recalls that she was fitted into a costume she did not want to wear because it made her feel ridiculous and humiliated. The swimming pool in the background of the picture brings memories of her disgust caused by the proximity of adult bodies, their pale, ugly skin and strong odour, her father's deformity, his wooden stump and the smell of his sweat — all that filled her with repugnance and overshadowed the pleasure of participating in the party.[4] Thus the memoirs, with their supply of meanings hidden beneath the surface of the photographs, emerge as "counter albums" (Smith, 533), which enter a dynamic relationship with the visual material.

For Lessing, photographs are "sites of remembering" (Smith and Watson 2001: 18) and mnemonic devices triggering recollections. Memory is here visually-induced, stimulated by the images — vehicles for memory, not containers (York, 651). The dynamic process of reminiscing relies on putting together fragments

[4] Or another image: her portrait when aged three she was taken to a studio in Teheran. She hated posing but was too vulnerable to oppose her mother, who disciplined her and forced her to pose for the photo.


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evoked by the pictures and then spinning new tales out of them. Photos activate memories of various kinds — "real" (US, 13), "concocted," "induced" (US, 20), "invited," (US, 20), "deduced" (US, 31), "dreamt" (US, 41), "reliable" (TB, 96), "authentic" (US, 19) — to mention Lessing's own classifications. She ostensibly re-interprets her recollections because for her remembering does not serve the purpose of re-establishing the status quo, but of making sense of the past throughout time and re-discovering its changing meaning in and for the present and future. Memories, Lessing contends, get "heavier with significance as time goes on" (US, 348). Progressive and relative to the time and purpose of remembering, reminiscing is thus a "performative act" (Butler 1993: 20), a production, an enactment of a drama of intentions: performance allows one to claim one's own truth, "different than received truth" (US, 41).

Lessing interprets her childhood and youth as a search for her identity and as a struggle for liberation from her family, from the social, cultural and political norms they imposed upon her. She recalls her continuous battle for emancipation from the family grip, both from the physical contact, like her parents' touch to which she felt an aversion, and from the values they cultivated and recycled in their versions of family history. Already as a child she contested these stories and refused to identify herself with them:

> Clearly I had to fight to establish a reality of my own, against an insistence from the adults that I should accept theirs. Pressure had been put on me to admit that what I knew was true was not so. I am deducing this. Why else my preoccupation that went on for years: *this* is the truth, *this* is what happened, hold on to it, don't let them talk you out of it. (US, 13–14, emphasis original)

She confesses that her continuous battle against her parents was the cause of many of her choices which she no longer deems to be right. But, as she explains, she was "fighting for [her] life against [her] mother" and "struggling panicky to escape" (US, 155). For Lessing, her mother had always been personification of oppression, and she never changed this conviction, not even at the advanced age when she was writing the memoirs.

Lessing "links the psychological to the sociopolitical" (Smith and Watson, 73) and sees her personal choices, her intellectual and political positions as shaped by her immediate surroundings and by the major historical processes occurring in her life-time: the two World Wars, colonialism and Communism. She believes that the family, as the basic social unit, as a microcosm of the state, absorbs the spirit of the age and enacts the Zeitgeist in its life. The family albums, whose photographs are filled with cultural-ideological content, reflect the operation of the dominant trends of the times. The multiple selves that Lessing scrutinizes in her memoirs — of daughter, mother, wife, writer, activist, lover, white colonial, feminist, to name but a few — emerge as "relative to time, history, cultural pattern and change," as Francis Hart has it (1970: 491).

Lessing's verbal and visual texts show her in her cultural environments, which she perceives as a source of permanent oppression. Her memoirs and albums


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express her situatedness as a subject who cannot escape subjection, in Althusser's sense, to coercive institutions and their ideologies. Photographs appear as a medium which, in a subtle but not invisible way, accurately conveys this coercive grip. As she writes at the end of *Under My Skin*,

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

The problem of her subjection to institutions and to the ideologies enforced by them appears as a major theme in the memoirs.

At this point it might be mentioned that Lessing embarked upon her autobiographies under external pressure, when she learnt she was under biographers' scrutiny. As she explains in *Under My Skin*, her motivation was self-defence: "Why an autobiography at all? Self-defence: biographies are being written. It is a jumpy business, as if you were walking along a flat and often tedious road in an agreeable half-dark but you know a searchlight may be switched on at any minute" (US, 14). She was told in 1992 that in the USA alone five authors, all strangers to her, were working on her biography. Upset with the unwanted scrutiny, skeptical about the biographers' capabilities and intentions, she expressed her scorn for their projects and even "urged her friends not to cooperate" (Schemo 1994). As she remarks with sarcasm in *Under My Skin*, "writers may protest as much as they like: but our lives do not belong to us" (US, 14). To counter the allegations she expected to emerge (the obvious ones being her complicated, to say the least, family and personal relationships and her involvement in Communism), Lessing decided to tell her own story. In her version, written in the form of memoirs, that is with a focus on public rather than personal matters (Buss 2001: 595), Lessing nevertheless does occasionally turn to confessional exposure and discloses many secrets, sometimes with shocking openness (her erotic life being a telling example). She admits her "sins" and continuously returns to what she calls "unforgivable": her rejection of her mother, her abandonment of her children and her devotion to Communism. But what cannot pass unnoticed is that her confession is meticulously staged, carefully crafted and filled with literary allusions. Rousseau, for instance, is recalled several times not without ironic intent. In her performance of confessions — whose range varies from what appears as significant truths to trivial admissions to sheer fabrications to literary stylizations — she as if rehearses, in different modes and styles, subjection to this disciplinary technology of the self, to use Foucault's term.

And so, by enacting what appears as subjection to coercion in her auto-texts, as represented by her inclusion of family albums and by confessional speech, Lessing demonstrates that although she cannot free herself from the oppressive frames and mechanisms, she may claim to be an agent in the very performance of her


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locatedness, in the creative act of remembrance, interpretation and writing, and in relating herself to the discursive spaces that are of concern in her memoirs.

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