

The Voices of Women

Doris Lessing. Writer, United Kingdom

During her speech, the writer emphasizes the role that Mediterranean heritage keeps playing across the European culture and, in particular, she praises the quality of Catalonia and Barcelona her feelings when in contact with them. By explaining the role of novels throughout the world's societies, Doris Lessing underlines their function in showing women's experiences of male domination across the world and in giving a voice to those women far from western culture.

Sometimes it is hard to explain certain sympathies, an affinity with a country... a town... a place... a people.¹ Yet everyone knows what you mean if you say, "I feel at home in..." in my case, Barcelona. I first visited this city in 1951, during a tour through the whole of Spain. That was before tourism began, though now that is hard even to imagine.

When you drove into a town the people came out to stare at the foreign car, foreign clothes – strangers; but in a few years all that would have changed. Even now I remember my impressions of this city, first the invigorating originality of Gaudí architecture and then something quietly graceful – unforgettable.

Barcelona has always, I think, been a favourite place for people who know the world as discerning travellers, and who find here something that does not exist elsewhere. What is it? But here comes the difficulty.

There is an atmosphere all of its own, something unique, at once recognisable, not

Spanish, not French. Catalonia has always been a bridge between the sombre spirit of Spain, and the milder airs of southern France. No one could say, standing in a Barcelona street: "This is like Provence." But Catalonia and that part of France that became the Languedoc have much in common, and the songs and poems of the troubadours, the singers and poets of Catalonia have much in common. There is a magic about Provençal poetry which I find here too, a teasing charm, that haunts, beguiles – and eludes.

I have been here as a visitor, and whenever I come there is a moment on arrival when I, as it were, test the air – is it still here? Yes, it is, but what? You hear it in voices, in laughter, in music. Once when I came all the streets of Barcelona were blossoming with red roses – everyone was carrying roses: your delightful custom of giving each other books and red roses throughout a certain day. This festival expresses the essence of this city, poetry and literature

1. This unpublished text corresponds to the speech given by Doris Lessing on 20th May 1999 at the prize giving ceremony of 9th Premi Internacional Catalunya.

and scholarship – and red roses. And I cannot think of another city that could do it.

This is unmistakably a Mediterranean city, one of the great companies of cities that have created the culture that has fed all of Europe, and all of us brought up on that heritage of myths, legends and tales so strong they are more like memories, may even dream about them, waking to wonder about the power of that ancient world.

Where I live in north-west London, the streets around my house are called Agamemnon, Achilles, Menelaus, Ulysses. Taxi drivers may say: “Oh, so you live in the Greek Streets?” A soldier who had had a classical education, as was common in those days, built the whole area in 1890 as one of the first commuter suburbs. The story goes that he had a wife with many children in the country, and a mistress with many more in London, so he turned that to pay for all businessman education.

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Just down the road from me you see a curious thing. He named a little road Orestes Mews. But the name has been plastered over. Clearly a council official was told that the name was unlucky. People living in the road were furious and scraped the plaster off, so you have Orestes on one side and the innocuous Menares on the other. How long ago did Homer tell his tales, and how old were the tales then? Many thousands of years. Yet that one name, Orestes, is still powerful enough to cause superstitious dismay. We take it for granted that after so many thousands of years the Mediterranean may still reach up to us in the north, with its myths, so that you may hear in a sitcom on the television one old woman say jealously of another, who is

making her face up for a party, “She thinks she’s Helen of Troy.” Yet I expect that official knew no more about Orestes than that he is bad luck, and that old woman knew only that Helen was a beauty in ancient times. It is extraordinary that these things should be, and even more that we take them for granted.

We know the Phoenicians came trading to our cold northern islands, as did the ships from Barcelona, I am sure: we are learning now how much more the ancients travelled than we previously thought. It is now easy to imagine the peoples of that world as always on the move, on foot, by ship, just as we are; travelling everywhere, taking in other cultures, and finding some of them so much to our taste that we feel almost as if we are their citizens. That is why I am so particularly grateful and pleased that you have generously decided to give me this prize, which seems to confirm an affinity I have tried to explain, a feeling of kinship. Thank you: believe me I am very grateful. I have been given prizes in other countries but none that has afforded me the pleasure this one does.

One reason I find Catalonia sympathetic is its history – so tumultuous, so varied. This is not a part of the world of which one may say that it is peaceful, untroubled, and immune from shocks and changes. And to me countries with this kind of experience are microcosms of the world, always in flux, under stress, and because of it, so creative.

I would like to say something about what people of my age have seen in our lives. My contemporaries will not need to be reminded, but younger ones may be surprised.

When I was a girl the world was carved into great power blocs. I was in the British Empire, seen by its rulers as eternal and favoured by God. In Europe, Nazi Germany seemed so formidable its end was unimaginable: they were talking about a thousand-year rule. Italy was grandiloquently and noisily claiming permanence. The Soviet Union stretched from the Baltic to the Far



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East. Japan was the Empire of the Sun. China was this vast much invaded country, soon to become another communist empire.

I was living in the southern part of Africa and part of something called White Supremacy, which was so sure of itself it was hard to imagine its end. In Spain there would shortly be General Franco. Every European country had an empire – France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Holland, Belgium. All these powers, power blocs, nations, empires, seemed impregnable. Yet the British Empire, so sure of itself, has disappeared.

Hitler's Germany lasted 13 years. Italy's bout of fascism now seems like a little aberration foreign to that country's real nature. The Soviet Union –that great empire– is gone. White Supremacy is gone. Franco has gone, Salazar, Japan's Empire of the Sun, and all the European world empires are gone and even forgotten. Once, in Germany, being interviewed, I remarked in passing to the young interviewer that Germany had had an empire, but she indignantly said that Germany never had one.

In a school I visited recently a girl enquired earnestly: "what was this British Empire people talk about?" So much for past glories.

One great power remains, the United States of America, and that seems solid enough now.

For some reason the spirit of our time does not tolerate great blocs, powers, empires. What could be more extraordinary than that a hundred years ago they seemed almost a law of nature and now seem anomalous? All the big units have broken up. The Soviet Union has become many countries. The colonies and dominions of the British Empire are self-governing. Britain itself may break up, or at least the strict ties that bind it are loosening: Scotland and Wales are about to acquire their own Parliaments. The point I am making cannot be lost on an audience of people in Catalonia. Perhaps one has to be my age to see everything, but everything, as impermanent, as a flux and a flow, with nothing staying the same, and as we all know by now the rate of change is accelerating so fast we can hardly keep up with it. The world is gripped by a fever of change. It is hard now to remember that there have been cultures that lasted, changing of course, but with a core of stability for hundreds of years: Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, and others, they had some kind of continuity.

But now a great empire – I am talking about the British Empire – thinks it has done well to have lasted three centuries. It takes strong nerves to live now and, above all, a willingness to accept change.

And now I want to talk directly about the role Catalonia has played in the popular imagination of our time. People of my age become accustomed, when talking to mixed audiences, of seeing sympathetic understanding of something said on the faces of older people, but blank looks on the faces of younger ones: that is one of the results of rapid change.

If I say that the Spanish Civil War was a powerful event in the imaginations of people living far from Spain, who might never have been to Spain, older people will know the truth of what I say. But wars, like everything else, become frozen in memory. The participants want to think about them, or to forget them, depending on what stage of post-bellum experience they are in – for there are stages of amnesia or remembering after a war. But they often do not know how their war has lived, lives on, in the minds of other countries. The Spanish Civil War transfixed a generation in Britain – to speak only of Britain. I remember hearing on the radio when I was far away in Southern Rhodesia, in the middle of Africa, news from this war, and my heart seemed to freeze with dread, as if I were personally involved. Now that was strange, since there had been other wars. No, it was that war, the Spanish Civil War, which made young people all over the world feel that it was our personal responsibility, to the point some actually came to fight. I knew people who did come to fight and the experience haunted them all their lives.

There was a book that encapsulated the power that Spain exerted on our thinking, and it was called *Homage to Catalonia*, by George Orwell, who fought here. That book did two things. It told of the heartbreak of the fighting, of ill-equipped and brave soldiers against

a strong enemy, and it also informed the Left about the dubious role played by the Reds and by the Soviet Union. It was a very influential book, and looking back now it is easy to see that it was one of those that transformed political thinking in Britain. The title, *Homage to Catalonia*, summed up a generation's – my generation's – admiration and concern for your country.

For us it was the phrase Homage to Catalonia that came to mean the Spanish Civil War, and that fact is not without its ironies. That book and Picasso's *Guernica*, which was seen by everyone in the world who had heard of the war at all.

This country of yours is richly endowed artistically, and its literature is a rich one. Yet it is not a large country. Small countries may have a disproportionately large influence on world culture, just as a single book, and a quite short book, may embody a generation's emotions about a war.

The novel is not to be judged only artistically, for the aesthetic pleasures we all know and appreciate, but because it also informs, and it is that aspect we tend to overlook

It is because I am a writer that you have honoured me by giving me this prize, and now I want to talk generally about literature. You honoured Yashar Kemal as a writer, and we know how influential his work has been in informing the world about conditions in Turkey. You honoured President Havel, and it was as a playwright and writer that he was known before he was a politician. It is now generally accepted that Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* was as much as anything a cause of the end of the Soviet Empire. Everywhere brave writers, sometimes at the risk of their lives, tell the truth. I am thinking here of Nawal el Saadawi, who writes of the women in more

rigid Islamic cultures. I am using her name to represent many others, less well-known. Such people pay a high price for their courage. But the house of literature has many mansions, and challenging injustice is only one of the functions of literature. We tend to take other aspects for granted.

We do take for granted what we are used to. Just as we do not stop to think how amazing it is that thousands-of-years-old myths from the Mediterranean infuse cultures all over the world, so we take for granted the novel. Let us try and imagine what our picture of the world and history would be without the novel, or drama, particularly the novel, so much a product of our time.

Let us say for argument's sake that the novel began with Don Quixote – began not very far from here. Three centuries, four – and without the novel how poor we would be. The novel is not to be judged only artistically, for the aesthetic pleasures we all know and appreciate, but because it also informs, and it is that aspect we tend to overlook. We owe our picture of pre-Revolutionary Russia to the great Russian writers. If we want to know what France was like during the period leading up to the First World War, there is Proust to inform us, whose picture of that time includes politics, with the Dreyfus case dominating, the army, medicine, fashion, theatre, music, painting, literature, food, the underworlds of crime and perversity. Thomas Mann performed the same service for Germany; the very varied English, Scottish, and Irish literatures have created a picture of these countries which transcends local interests. In the part of Africa I know, Zimbabwe, Thomas Hardy is a favourite writer: in Britain we read him as a voice from a still part-rural past, but in Africa, where they are still close to the countryside, Thomas Hardy seems contemporary. In the last few decades the explosion of literature from South America has painted a map of that continent which is more powerful than any-

thing travel books and guidebooks could give us. To find out about 19th century Spain we are advised to read Galdos, and for 19th century Portugal we are directed to Eça de Queirós.

It is not only a country, a culture, a period of history that we may explore through literature, but states of mind and thinking that transcend national boundaries. Two immediately spring to mind: one is black writing, the work of black writers as self-consciously and deliberately political; the other is women's writing. In the last four decades, a certain kind of women's writing has arrived, which aims to be self-consciously female, expressing in various ways women's experience of male domination. Sometimes it seems that they think they have invented something new. For some parts of the world this is true: women's writing is new. But in this country, Catalonia, there have been great women writers in the 19th century and long before the women's movement of the 1960s. If you are a writer from the English tradition you have to be gratefully aware of a heritage which means you do not have to fight as a woman to be published and appreciated.

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The publisher Carmen Callil, who created the feminist publishing house Virago, spent months in the British Museum, discovering there dozens of female writers whose names are mostly forgotten. In England women have been earning their living as writers for centuries and sometimes loudly protesting against their lot. One may find such outcries in Charlotte Bronte, and, more subtly – and more deadly for that – in Jane Austen. My grateful consciousness of this heritage is why I subscribe to Virginia's Woolf's dictum that women writers will be free when, sitting down to write, they do not think "I am

writing as a female.” For one thing, our heritage includes male writers. When the novel was born, the voices of women were at once heard: women appeared, after centuries of invisibility.

Ordinary women that is. Before the novel women were poets, and singers, and by definition had to be upper-class women or at least not forced into drudgery. To mention just one novel, *Anna Karenina*, we have been so hypnotised by that archetypal love story that we have failed to notice that this book contains a whole gallery of women of that time of whom perhaps the society beauty Anna is the least interesting. It is entertaining to read this novel – and others – with this thought: that it would not be possible to find these kinds of women now, not in our culture at least, not in the prosperous West, though they are to be found in less advanced cultures. But I do think we should remember that the arrival of the novel meant that ordinary women suddenly found a voice. And this development broadened with the women’s movement of the Sixties. We know for instance what poor black women are thinking in a country in Africa, or women under Islam, or women in China. Again and again when a novel appears a whole new area of human experience is opened up to us: that is one function of the novel, the one we most often overlook.

I could go on, but the point I think is made: our knowledge of the world we live in has been made largely by literature, like a many-coloured transparency that fits over a skeleton of facts – geography, formal history, physics –, it is a record of thoughts, feelings, changing sensibilities. To understand how multi-faceted, and generous a knowledge it is, we have only to spend half an hour with some person who has not read. For there is a new phenomenon, the educated person who might have spent many years in school and university, who has read nothing, and whose view of the world is limited to what he or she needs for a career.

Once education included reading as a matter of course. Not now. In Britain great efforts are being made to get children and young people to read, and one may see that infinitely touching thing, a young man or woman, in their twenties, who has suddenly understood how handicapped they are, not having read, having only watched television, trying to catch up, starting to read.

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For centuries reading, the book, has been valued and honoured, and every person could acquire books. We are in the middle of a technological revolution that threatens books – and we are very conscious of being in the middle of this revolution; in the past there have been revolutions and it seems people went through them hardly knowing what was happening to them. One was an earlier technological revolution, printing, and the advent of the book. It took a few decades to cover Europe with printing presses and books. The speed of it must have been a shock, because people knew that past change had been very slow. When the first precious hand-copied books appeared people read them aloud. It never occurred to them to do anything else. The monasteries were very noisy places, with monks chanting from sacred texts. Then they read silently, but mouthing the words. To learn to read as we do, silently, took two to three centuries.

That had been a slow change, but now, suddenly, there were books everywhere and people reading. Did anyone ask then about what effect this revolution would have on our minds? Would our brains change? Because of course brains were altered and we do know about some of the changes. Perhaps there were changes we have not even now understood? The most startling change is easy to see: we lost our

memories. Before there were reference books, directories, address books, diaries, people had all that information in their heads. One may meet an old person, let us say in Africa, illiterate, with a memory as ours once was. Names, addresses, telephone numbers, facts, events, dates – it is all in their heads and they see our dependency on things written down as a kind of crippling. We lost a capacity then, and I do not think it was foreseen. Our brains were altered. And now they are changing again. In our careless human way we have allowed – passively, without forethought – to undergo this new revolution of the internet, computers, faxes, copy machines, telephones, satellites, and we have no idea at all what the results will be. Some are already evident: children’s brains are different from adult brains; they find the new technology easy. And everybody’s attention span is shorter: we are developing grasshopper minds. And so what next? We do not know.

For then it was a national “we”, of this nation, that nation, but now more often the “we” is the humanity of the global village

I have been talking about literature, about communication, because that is my field, but

we all know that everywhere we look, at any sphere of human activity, it is the same: an acceleration of dangers, and possibilities, of fears and of hope. And so, as is always the case, or rather, as the case has been since we acquired the capacity to see ourselves with some kind of detachment, we know we are standing on some kind of a bridge, looking into a past that disappears into myth and legend – a past that is always retreating as that shadow which is our ignorance is pushed back, and meanwhile we face an unknown future. But there is one great new thing in our world, a change full of hope: there is a big difference between the “we” of let us say a hundred years ago, and the “we” of now, for then it was a national “we”, of this nation, that nation, but now more often the “we” is the humanity of the global village. We do know, we know very well, how dangerous, how unpredictable our future is; we know that there are possibilities our grandparents never dreamed of. And nowhere may one feel these perspectives – into the past, into the future –, more immediately than here, on the shores of the Mediterranean, where we are today.

And now I would like to thank you again, from the heart, for giving me this prize, and for inviting me to be here.