

Research Article

'Lift me up!': The New Major Discourses of Care and Ageing in Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers*

Zuzanna Zarebska* 

University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract

The genre of *Reifungsroman* considers different temporal aspects of individuation. It aids and assesses the capacity of an older person to re-story their life, enter meaningful relationships, make amends with the past and productively evolve as an individual. Instead of focusing solely on the present, time is seen as a continuum in *Reifungsroman* with a special emphasis on the past events and narratives. This article will trace the late life transformation that Jane and Maudie undergo as all life is mutable and finite, awareness of which can make us more compassionate. In *The Diaries of Jane Sommers*, written by Doris Lessing and published in 1984 the narrator tells the story of the relationship she constructs with an elderly friend, Maudie, whom she meets in the streets of London and who triggers her identarian metamorphoses. Maudie embodies all the stereotypes of an old woman, she has crone-like features and an unforgiving temper. From the physical maladies to emotional suffering, Jane Sommers is herself a source of discomfort and displeasure to those around her. As the narrative unravels and cleanses Jane from rampant egoism, as she bathes after each visit to Maudie's home, she deconstructs her old narratives and transitions into an empathetic self. As Maudie shades her trauma in words and being bathed by Jane, both undergo a process of healing. Maudie dies with dignity and out of this sacrificial moment of catharses, the meeting of the now and then, new Jane is born. She erases the old wry Jane, an ambitious and vain journalist in a women's magazine, only concerned with success and everlasting youth, who spends time and her financial gains on material goods. This article will look into the discourses on ageing and the genre of *Reifungsroman* in *The Diaries of Jane Sommers*, Lessing's fifth novel, published under a pseudonym and separately as two separate books: *The Diaries of a Good Neighbour* and *If the Old Could* against criticism from various editorial boards. I will analyse the processes of resignation of the minor discourses and their relationship towards the major discourses on growing older. I will consider Jana and Maudie as a two-faced Janus and a dyad of the old and the new, the ich and the poor, the successful and the unsuccessful: a crone, a witch and young woman whose polyphony of voices can re-story the narratives of women and ageing.

Keywords

Reifungsroman, Doris Lessing, Minor Discourses, Women's Voices, Relationality, Ageing

1. Introduction

Studies of aging inevitably deal with vulnerability uncovered by intersectional categories of gender, age, corporeality. We are infinitely afraid of aging as a premonition of death, the

dissolution of boundaries, where space is opens for the other to enter in to help, as presentment of dissolution of life. Even though some critics such as Germain Greer (1991, 2008) see

*Corresponding author: zuzanna.sanches@campus.ul.pt (Zuzanna Zarebska)

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ageing as a transition to greater emancipation from the normative discourse [6, 7] it is still embedded in narratives of midlife downsizing and erosion of agency (Gullette 2004, 2017) [8, 9]. However, a positive outcome from aging can be drawn as it presents life to us from entirely new perspectives, whereas the other categories of gender, social role and beauty are being diminished. Louise Glück says in one of her interviews,

One of the few good things to say about old age is that you have a new experience. Diminishment is not everybody's most anticipated joy, but there is news in this situation. And that, for a poet or writer, is invaluable. I think you have always to be surprised and to be, in a way, a beginner again, otherwise I would bore myself to tears [1].

An abandonment of the normative politics of essentialist categories implies our recognition of vulnerability against our socially, culturally and politically defined identities. This can have either pernicious effects on our lives or we may see it as an opportunity to embrace it with creativity and awe. Again, Glück writes about the territory of ageing,

You find yourself losing a noun here and there, and your sentences develop these vast lacunae in the middle, and you either have to restructure the sentence or abandon it. But the point is, you see this, and it has never happened before. And though it's grim and unpleasant and bodes ill, it's still, from the point of view of the artist, exciting and new [1].

As long as frailty counts as a defining attribute within the logic of rampant capitalism, our identities remain within the normative framework that keeps older people at a disadvantage, especially women, within "the double-standard." And yet, the pursuit of individual profit and comfort is debunked by the fact that "Let's face it. We're undone by each other" [2]. No life is disposable and no life exists on its own and by denying the right to live freely to some people we are devaluing our own lives:

Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost "in" you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related [2].

As human beings we distinguish ourselves with being necessary and fully deterministic. Age brings with it a possibility to re-story the narratives we knew nothing about "in advance" [5] especially when we are confronted with bereavement and solitude. Simone de Beauvoir writes that "one can never know oneself, but only narrate oneself" [3]. Narratives of ageing can transcend our own egoic limitations while "spinning [...] singular experiences that intertwine and overlap while still remaining separate" [15]. We can transcend our cultural limitations imposed on us by normative discourses if

we see aging as contextual and perspective-based offering a reorientation towards a more reflective and integrational state. This has the capacity to subvert the fact that older people "are not invisible but [...] are not seen" [13] that inevitably leaves an empty space, where official narratives on age are installed. Transcendence is both a means of and an end to integrating different narratives of aging, questioning the dominant discourses crystalized as the normative narratives of intersectional categories such as age, gender, class or race.

According to Lars Tornstam (1989, 2005), who coined the term "gerotranscendence" [18, 19], going beyond the normative expectations encapsulates the ethos of ageing which "is not a mere continuation of the activity patterns and values of mid-life, but, rather, something different: a transformation characterized by new ways of understanding life, 'activities', oneself and others" [11]. It is not an adjustment of mid-life constructed according to the script of successful and active. It is rather a discovery of the comfort felt at living at one's own pace and in accordance with one's own inner voice. It is a synchronization of the now and oneself in a continuous dialogue with the other, the *Dasein* at which we arrive with the wisdom and experience of our lives so far. For Heidegger, it is the experience of the face-to-face encounter that destabilizes the *a priori-a posteriori* dichotomy by urging that, in the face-to-face, the third party (humanity) looks at me *through* the eyes of the other and this phenomenon is expressed in all his *Totality and Infinity, Existence and Existents* and *Time and The Other* (in reverse order).

2. Doris Lessing and the Narratives of Change

The Diaries of Jane Somers is a duology consisting of two books entitled *The Diary of a Good Neighbor* and *If the Old Could....* The narratives form a cycle and form a *Reifungsroman* [20], as first used by Barbara Frey Waxman (1990) and here, the story of growth of Jane (Janna) Somers. Jane Somers is "a handsome, middle-aged widow with a very good job in the magazine world" [12] a free woman. She takes great pride in her career and her material possessions, her clothes and spotlessness but remains conscious of her incapacity to deal with the abject in her life, such as illness and death of her husband Freddy and her mother. From the beginning of the narrative Jane displays an innate disposition to acute self-analysis that leads her towards moral maturation. From being a child wife and daughter, she is transformed into empathetic and unconditional carer for a stranger, trying to atone for her moral failures of ignorance and absenteeism towards her family. As such, *The Diaries* can be read as a process of "actively-dialogic understanding of the self's discovering the other" [4]. Furthermore, the "ignorance and indifference" [12] of younger generations as well as patriarchal uneven distribution of power remain the key issues addressed by the author. Voicing her preoccupation with the

disadvantaged in the contemporary society, Lessing wanted to “get free of that cage of associations and labels that every established writer has to learn to live inside.” [12] She understood that being enclosed in a category would quickly limit her readership and she too wanted to be judged and appreciated on merit. Moreover, Lessing knew that “labels change” [12] and so to tastes and interests that inevitably push aside the minor discourses that are considered uncomfortable and disturbing. Hers “have been – starting with *The Grass is Singing*: she is a writer about the colour bar (obsolete term for racism) – about communism – feminism – mysticism: she writes space fiction, science fiction.” [12] A minor discourse would serve “for a few years” [12] before becoming overshadowed by a major discourse who would only imprison the author even further in a vast array of interdependencies. Thus, *The Diaries* were initially published under the pseudonym of Jane Somers. *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* was first published in 1983 and *If The Old Could...* was published a year later *The Diaries of Jane Somers* were first published in a volume by Michael Joseph in 1984.

Following Lessing in her “Introduction” to the novel, “Jane Somers knew nothing about a kind of dryness, like a conscience, that monitors Doris Lessing whatever she writes and in whatever style” [12] and so she could be easily associated with a freer way of story-telling as well as written into a world of popular culture that many a critic would consider minor. The minor discourses are then reflected in the choice of the genre that Jane adopts as her mode of expression. She is the editor of a fashion magazine that celebrates the popular culture and assigns women roles of passive consumers of material goods, especially from the domestic sphere and the world of clothes. Jane is responsible for the stories and the thematic of the magazine that she has built with the help of a female colleague and friend, Phyllis. They have both devoted their lives to the making of the publication, yet there exists a discrepancy of how both of the women led their private lives and accommodated them to the challenges of professional life. Phyllis seems to have sacrificed less and during the course of the narrative decides to enact another cultural stereotype of an ageing wife who dutifully follows her cheating husband who is climbing the ladder of public success. After they “sat there for years, making the magazine work” [12], Phyllis settles down in the United States and gives entirely up her professional aspirations even though she always was “pushy and impatient” [12] and did not know “how to let things happen” [12]. Female sexuality, a minor discourse, is at the beginning of the novel treated with frankness. Jane openly describes her sexual life and the existence of rampant desire that underscored her relationships. A sexually adventurous woman could easily be called frivolous. The existing double-standard of sexuality that renegades women to solely passive and receiving roles, states that women are culturally expected to have fewer sexual partners compared to men. Their sexuality is often seen, especially in middle-age, as the narrative of the last chance, after which women must resign themselves to

compulsory abstinence.

2.1. *Reifungsroman* and the Story of Jane Somers

The journey of internal growth – the *Reifungsroman* – has its origins in a minor narrative, a paper advertisement. “I saw in the paper advertisement: Would you like to befriend an old person?” [12] starts Jane’s journey of self-discovery and emancipation from public life. She rejects her first chance of becoming a carer to an older person, Mrs Penny who is small and fidgety, “She would take over my life. I feel smothered and panicky at the idea of being at her beck and call” [12]. However, destiny soon strikes back and almost through a magical spell or chemical concoction, Jane meets Maudie Fowler while doing shopping in the local chemist. The old creature, a witch, Maudie fits into the stereotype of an old hag who is so spiteful for Jane to have decided to discard her from the feature on a number of stereotypes of women “then and now” [12].

When reading Lessing’s work, we are also reminded that the practice of care has long been considered a minor narrative. Caring instead of curing would traditionally be thought of as a female practice, whereas the act of applying medical treatment would be seen as a male territory. It has only been recently, owing to a growing interest in medical humanities, that these two discourses of caring and curing have begun to be used in a dialogue. Authors studying “care-based critique of justice” [16] postulate that it needs to be understood as both beneficial in its essence and practice as “The value and practice of care should have a place in moral theory” [16]. Having this two-fold structure, care implies an ongoing dialogue between the carer and the cared for, the dialogue being a physical act of service as well as an emotional connection [10]. A mere, non-mindful practice of applying medical treatment without attending to the emotional suffering, can be seen, and so in in *The Diaries*, as a moral failure. Much too often, patients, older and dependent people are seen only through the lens of their disease or incapacity and not in their multifaceted humanness. From the moment of the diagnosis, doctors and carers target either illness or incapacity whereas the patient remains nameless. By finding ways of how old people can be cared for ethically and empathetically in their chronic if not terminal states, Doris Lessing elevates the debate onto the multidimensional front and the public space where it can become a major narrative and interest.

There has been a substantial emphasis of the idea of cure that cannot be not fully conceived if there is no care that targets both the body and the mind of the other person, making healing a holistic process. It is true, however, that with Doris Lessing’s *Diaries* we remain within the context of women’s literature. Yet, we see how the discourse of femininity directly related to being a natural carer is debunked with Jane’s early life trajectory. As a child-bride and a child mother her story of this *Reifungsroman* is to transform her minor narrative – the

narrative of emotional immaturity – into a major one. It is only in doing so, that Jane can fully become herself and flourish in order to, one day, to fulfil the life cycle of birth and death that's she is confronted with throughout her life and one that she rejects. And the cure happens as the minor discourse is transformed into a major discourse. It happens when the cure on the private level is elevated to the community level, to a greater dimension, telling us that life is more than private pain or joy but rather a constellation of voices.

2.2. Relationality and Undoing of Trauma

The undoing of trauma is like dressing an open wound. It is painful and ghastly. For the reader to be able to understand the profoundness of the trauma and the depth of humiliation a juxtaposition is made between the expectations that we have when we are led to imagine a china cup and a porcelain tea service and the abject experience of drinking from a container that has never been cleaned. "Mrs Fowler brought in an old brown teapot, and two rather pretty old china cups and saucers. It was the hardest thing I ever did, to drink out of the dirty cup." [12] The experience is transformative and penetrates sharply into the recesses of Maudie's and Jane's being so that Maudie is "... trembling with pride and dignity." [12] For the narrative exchange to happen in order to propel change, both of the characters need to strip down of their prejudice and pain, the old and dirty rags of their lives until now, the moment of their meeting. In fact, this is exactly what happens when Jane attempts, for the first time, to give Maudie a bath. To us readers, the experience of the abject is elevated each time Jane attends to Maudie and by doing so, she is able to see the futility and emptiness of her own life, as well as, the silent trauma, she herself accumulated and inflicted on others. The narratives of the two women form a cycle similar to what can be seen as the cycle of life, from being younger to growing old and dying. Jane's and Maudie's meeting is therapeutic for both and their story resembles the two-faced god Janus, observing the past and the present at the same time. In fact, we can see their stories interchangeably and silently they become indistinguishable. For the connection to be there between Maudie and Jane their narratives need intertwine on a more primary level, one that goes beyond the old age and touches upon the questions of gender and power distribution. For both of the women are subject to the operations of the obligatory and normative discourses of gender, both were shaped by women's "naturalised" interest in material clothes synonymous of beauty and both fail to escape their influence on their personalities. There is much cruel irony in the fact that Maudie herself worked in the "fashion business" making hats and feeding women's dependence on the value of the material possessions and physical appearance, which then was taken advantage of and stolen away from her by men. The possessions that Maudie has still bear signs of some value but at the same time display irreversible decomposition and decline. The afternoon when Jane brings a copy of her magazine over

to Maudie's place, she looks at it "with a smile that was all pleasure." [12]

When I went in after work on Wednesday, I took in a copy of our magazine. I was ashamed of it, so glossy and sleek and slick, so *clever* – that is how it is presented, its image. But she took it from me with a girl's mischievous smile, and a sort of prance of her head – what remained of a girl's tossed hair – and said 'Oh, I love these, I love looking at these things they think up.' [12]

Confronted with Maudie's reaction Jane begins to question the validity of the major discourse that posits women directly in relation with material possessions and their physical attributes. She does not wish to judge Maudie on the external appearance of her home and her body, "But why do I go on about dirt like this? Why do we judge people like this? She was no worse off for the grime and the dust, and even the smells" [12]. The contrast between the gloss and the dirt is stark but Jane decides "not to notice, if I could help it, not to keep judging her, which I was doing, by the sordidness" [12].

The operations of *Reifungsroman* in *The Diaries* affect both of the narratives and both need to get through reminiscence and re-storing. Whenever the two women meet, Maudie enters a story-telling role which objective is to re-signify her own life and heal the trauma and by doing so, allow Jane to further re-signify Maudie's narrative to heal her own wounds and to indirectly, instruct us readers. "When I was young my father owned his shop, and later we had a house in St John's Wood" [12] says Maudie, having us believe that her childhood story may be as any other ordinary narrative. We soon learn that she was subject to abuse and hostility and that the abandonment she is living at the moment of narration is a result of all the trauma she endured during her life. Abandoned by everybody, Maudie projects her suffering on Jane and tries to inflict similar pain in order to be seen while still craving company and affection, "And when I left she said, in her way of not looking at me, 'I suppose I won't be seeing you again?'" [12] To be able to reach out to others and ask for help having endured so much pain is a long process and not an easy one for the egoic defences that have been erected. When Maudie expresses her wish to see Jane again there seems to happen "a moment between us of intimacy: that is the word" [12] However, this is still only a word that has not been transformed fully into action and pride still seems to speak louder than the need of company. "And yet she was so full of pride and did not want to ask, and she turned away from me and began petting the cat: Oh, my little pet, my little pretty" [12] Both Maudie and Jane resort to an interlocutor or a short-hand to dissipate the intensity of the transformative processes they are undergoing. To Maudie, her solace is found in the cat who she cares for. For Jane, her interlocutor is Joyce, a work colleague and a friend, and a character whose secondary narrative has an indirect yet relevant importance in *The Diary of the Good Neighbour* and an even greater one in *If the Old Could*. which, as mentioned earlier, makes up for the second books of *The Diaries of Jane Somers*. After visiting Maudie,

Jane cleanses herself and purges of the foul smells and stories, “The sour, dirty smell was in my clothes and hair. I bathed and washed my hair and did myself up and rang Joyce and said, ‘Let’s go out for dinner.’” [12]

With time, Jane begins to take notice of everything Maudie “did not want me to see.” [12] The old clothes are frayed and stained even though they might have been of good quality in the past, the furniture is part very good but the bedroom is overflowed with garbage and rags. It is inhospitable and dirty and Maudie does not sleep in the bed but on the divan next door. We soon find out that the drawers are full of unwashed underwear other garments owing to Maudie’s incontinence. Her food is scarce and stale and yet an experience of trying cake with “real cream” [12] pulls her back into the narrative mode of reminiscing. Maudie has difficulty eating some of the proper food Jane brings over because “her teeth made it impossible for her to eat fruit.” [12] Between the bouts of remembering and small talk, there is still reticence in Mrs Fowler, the exposure of trauma leaving her humiliated. She still believes that Jane is paid by the Council to be a “Good Neighbour” and will soon abandon her after not having

pieced it all together yet. I see that it will be a long time before my ignorance, my lack of experience, and her reticence, and her rages – for now I see how they simmer there, making her eyes light up with what you’d think, at first, must be gaiety or even a sense of comedy – a long time before how she is, her nature, and who I am, my rawness, can make it possible for me to form a whole picture of her [12].

The picture that Jane is drawing of Maudie is not only a reference to the old woman herself, she is, in fact, drawing a picture of her own. Still, a more accurate reflection of Maudie’s life is being presented to the reader familiar with the Western ideology complicit with ageist behaviour as defended by Kathleen Woodward (1991, 1999, 2009) in her well-known work on cultural ageing [22, 23] that argues that ageism is rooted in discrepancies in power either upheld by the body or in discourse [21]. The abuse she endured during her life time and the mistreatment she has been subject to recently on the part of the social workers and the Home Help, who “cheated her and didn’t do any work, and wouldn’t wash her floors” [12].

The question of the apartment gains an utmost importance for the well-being of Maudie. It is symbolic of women’s emancipation, having for many decades stood for the “room of one’s own” since “with your own place, you’ve got everything. Without it, you are a dog.” [12] It is also true that home has a special importance for older people whose greatest fear is to leave their own home and being placed in an institution because of a growing dependence on other people’s help. Housing in later age is one of the tenet preoccupations of gerontology and the studies of cultural aging. Older people fear being incarcerated in the Home, knowing that the level of dependence steadily enhances and correlates directly with the place where they are accommodated, the hospital ward being

their final destination and a place where they die alone.

2.3. The New Discourses of Femininity

Soon, when a friendship is established between Jane and Maudie it is as if a deal is struck between them that makes Jane feel trapped, “I felt trapped. I am trapped. Because I have made a promise to her. Silently. But it is a promise” [12]. The friendship is an alliance to change the discourses of femininity that safeguard women’s worth and visibility only when they are certain age, having them disappear when they are culturally aged. “They buy *us*, we must make them want to buy *us*.” [12] The invisibility of older women is shown when Jane speaks about a feature her magazine is publishing about women – “the issue of Lillith that has Female Images” [12]. However, the issue did not display any images of older women because all the readership would be afraid that it was not their age group. The only images that were considered fit for the publication were an image of a girl in her late teens who is ready to emancipate herself, a mid-twenties independent new woman, a young mother and a lastly a “married woman with part-time job, two children, running home and husband” [12]. Even though, “one day we will be old” is Jane’s bitter realisation, she knows that a piece on older women would not find any readership, because people’s belief is that old people need to be hidden from the public eye and the grey tsunami is yet a burden for younger generations. “*Why aren’t they in a Home? Get them out of the way, out of sight, where young healthy people can’t see them, can’t have them on their minds*” [12]! The idea of who is allowed visibility is one that bears much importance on women’s and ageing studies, because women are connotated with their physical appearance, the qualities that define it are gender specific and the performance of femininity displays traits of a masquerade and narcissism, as according to Susan Sontag “The display of narcissism goes on all the time” [17]. The femininity revolves around the attributes of softness and meekness and are in direct relation to women’s faces that are supposed to be “girlish.” “Women do not simply have faces, as men do; they are identified with their faces” [17]. Men proudly evolved from being “boyish” which visually is “girlish” to being manly, having little obligation to hide the signs of the progress of time. “Boys encouraged to develop their bodies” [17], girls are expected to leave their bodies as unaffected by body-building activities as possible, being strong or resilient never being the attributes of healthy femininity. “The ideal state proposed for women is docility, which means not being fully grown up” [17].

Maudie’s traumatic story and her worsening health soon have an influence on the temporality of the text that gathers speed. The narratives of the past are transformed into the present and so Jane admits that, “All that I have written up to now was a recapitulation, summing up. Now I am going to write day by day, if I can” [12]. As Maudie weaves the web of her narrative, so does Jane. The cathartic purging of the normative standards of beauty and behaviour are a form of

dealing with male privilege recurrent in Maudie's and Jana's stories. "The prejudices that mount against women as they grow older are an important arm of male privilege. It is the present unequal distribution of adult roles between the two sexes that gives men a freedom denied to women" [17]. What has been marginalised by culture, becomes a major discourse of Lessing's work that spans over the forties and their post-war atmosphere, and reaches 'the new wave of the late fifties when the magazine was overtaken by a male editor Boris that Jane did not know how he became editor since he "was not very effective" [12] yet "he had been appointed by the Board" [12]. It is not only the glass ceiling that women do not seem to be able to break through, the society's structure is reflected in all the dramas that Lessing carefully describes. Jane's colleague Joyce is being cheated on by her husband who still demands her fidelity to their union, a young woman Phyllis is climbing the ladder of career that requires of the younger generation to push out the older generations. Even Jane herself is becoming to show signs of burn-out trying to navigate the routine of going into Maudie's each night after work, the "proper baths and the diary" [12]. Maudie's story-telling continues as Jane readjusts into her new role of a carer that transforms her completely. She not only is the listener of Maudie's story, she is the healer of her own and of Maudie's broken lives, by the simple act of listening, of accepting vulnerability, of being there, "She tells me about the times in her life she was happy. She says she is happy now, because of me (and that is hard to accept, it makes me feel angry, that so little can change a life), and therefore she likes to think of happy times" [12]. *Chronos* time collapses into *kairos* time, numerically, "another five weeks have gone. Nothing has changed... and yet of course it must have" [12]. Over time Jane and Maudie grow into each other where all becomes a polyphony of desperate voices and moments of epiphany. "This is the best time of my life" [12] transforms into "the rages that make her blue eyes blaze and glitter" (131) and then "Maudie has been ill again" [12], when eventually "we were both so tired and overwrought, we've been screeching at each other like...what [12]? Suddenly Jane gives in and becomes ill which makes her bed ridden for four weeks. It is when the quality of her thinking changes, when the importance given to her thoughts is given the solidity of a major discourse.

Four weeks of doing nothing... But I have been thinking. Thinking. Not the snap, snap, snap, intuitions-and-sudden-judgements kind, but long slow thoughts. About Maudie. About Lilith. About Joyce. About Freddie. About those brats of Georgie's [12].

Jane goes through the experience of dying with Maudie. "Maudie is sitting there, willing not to die. I simply do not understand it; and that's all there is to it!" [12] What she is now doing stands opposite of her inability to engage in a relationship with another person. "So, keeping an eye on Maudie to make sure I am there when she comes fully awake, I go into the ward and talk to whoever seems to welcome it"

[12]. She failed her loved ones in the past, because an idea of being there with another person was alien to her. There was no empathetic relationality towards anything but her ego, and her egoic needs were the only ones she was willing to satisfy.

At the end of *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* the readers are informed of Jane's desire to create a new discourse, a narrative of invincible women who belong to the margins and who were not proper agents of their own stories. "What I am thinking about, as I sit in that ward, watching; as I sit with Maudie; watching, is a possible new novel; but this time not a romantic one" [12]. Her anger at seeing the social and cultural injustice culminates in a productive rage, a transformative catharsis, "I'm so angry I could die of it" [12]. Jane knows that she must transform Maudie's narrative into a major story in order for it to be heard and made justice to, such might have been Maudie's final wish, "Lift me up, lift me up! (...) Maudie died last night" [12]. Jane tells the reader, "I got home raging, went around the flat slamming and banging and muttering to myself. Like Maudie" [12].

I want to write about these ward maids, the Spanish or the Portuguese or Jamaican or Vietnamese girls who work for such long hours, and who earn so very little, and who keep families, bring up children, and send money home to relatives in Southeast Asia, or some little village in the Algarve or the heart of Spain. These women are taken for granted (...) They all have the same look, of a generalise anxiety, that I recognize; it comes from just keeping on top of things, from a fear of something happening (...) I have read about it? No, I think it comes from Maudie: probably, when Maudie talked, dredging up from her past some tale that now I have forgotten, there was on her face, because it was in her mind, this look [12].

3. Conclusion

In the end Maudie's tragic story is a trauma narrative that includes all agents who have culturally been considered marginal and minor. Yet, it is a story of trauma that leads to transformation, the undoing that results in re-doing. And what does it mean if we are undone by another person? Is relationality a peaceful process and if not, shall we try and make it less ravenous. In fact, I argue that we need to embrace both the crisis and the atonement in a committedly ethical criticism similar to Toril Moi in her *Sexual/textual politics: Feminist literary theory* [14]. We need to experience the undoing before we can re-do something, and that can only be achieved through others. "And therefore, do I, Janna, or Jane Somers, sit by a dying woman, fighting to make my mind change gear, lose a layer or become rawer and exposed, so as really to know that I shall die. But Nature won't let me [12].

From a philosophical perspective, care for other/myself is the continuation of the Heideggerian question, later developed by Emmanuel Levinas: "Why is there being instead of simply nothing? There is "being" in contemplation, there is "being" in the liminal space between wakefulness and sleep, there is "being" outside of me, and following Chekhov my role is to

pose questions rather than answer them – that is the substance of being that is already there and it needs to be put forward, uncovered and re-written.

As in late Heidegger and in Levinas, the hermeneutics of the self that does not want to see selfhood as nothingness, can only happen by being-in-the-world with others. Transcendence is motivated by the awareness of finitude and mortality, and in order to achieve it, or at least temporarily experience it, revival, atonement, reminiscing become useful tools. It is in and with the other in whom I find the transcendental. Heidegger sees communication as already constituted by others. The language I use is already possessed by the other and so uncovering myself takes on a ritual character of benevolence and good will towards both myself and the other. I share the non-verbal vocabulary with the other person but I only discover its meaning and my willingness to compromise through them. This, at least, seems to be the underlying major narrative of Lessing's work.

Author Contributions

Zuzanna Zarebska is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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