

# Mirror Images in Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before The Dark*

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**Abstract** *The Summer Before The Dark* is a representative work of Lessing's women portrayal transition from focusing on their outside world exploration to on their inner world seeking. This paper analyzes the novel from mirror images of the heroine and the various implications. Throughout the novel, Kate is depicted looking into mirrors many times, and while she studies her images in the mirrors, adjusting her physical appearance according to different standards, she is actually being through different psychological states, the changes of which reveal the process of her inner growth, maturing, and attaining a final integrated self.

**Key words** *The Summer Before The Dark*; mirror images; psychological states

In her early writing, Lessing was particularly good at portraying the images of women that have strong will and self-reliance, describing the difficulties, confusions and changes experienced by them in a patriarchal society, and drawing people's concerns about women's issues. During 1960s and 1970s, Doris Lessing began to read and study psychological analysis and Sufism with intense interest. To be exact, Lessing was receptive to Lacan's theories on consciousness and human Psyche and to Sufi concepts of human integration and the realization of it through revelation of inner world. Lessing apply extensively these concepts and ideologies into her writings, and thus the 1970s witnessed Lessing's significant changes in creation principles and artistic style: she began to penetrate deep into women's inner mind, trying to reflect women's consciousness by writing amply about dreams and symbols. In this period, although the novels are still based on the lives of women and their concerns, but the heroines are no longer passionate young women, but rather middle-aged women who ponder deeply over life and marriage, in attempt to get a whole and integrated self in chaotic living situations. *The Summer Before The Dark*, published in 1973 was a representative work of this transition.

Kate Ferreira is a clever and independent girl who grows up in a well-educated

home. She has got the opportunity to study Romance language and literature in Oxford while she meets Michael Brown who just starts his career after ten years of war and training and is seven years older. They fall in love and get married. Kate Brown becomes a full-time housewife, supporting devotedly her husband and their four children. The novel begins when Kate approaches 45, and has finished her sacrifice role as a supportive wife and tendering mother. Now that the husband Michael Brown has a decent job and some private interests on his own, the children, in their grownup age, have their own social life and pursuits; it becomes clear that Kate is no longer needed by her family. Besides, the marital problems and the parent-and-children gap once deliberately ignored now blow her mind. The middle-aged housewife is in turmoil of spiritual crisis, feeling confused, depressed and raged. So when she is invited to work as a translator in a global organization, she accepts it, expecting some changes may happen. Her new experience outside family circle proves fruitful, which involves doing social work, having a love affair, getting sick being alone, and so on. Though it is not all satisfying, it gives her opportunity and perspective to reflect on past life and to ponder deeply over various topics such as age, love and marriage, sex, appearance and reality, and eventually she learns more about herself and gain inner equilibrium. Though she is back and has to face the same family, she is a totally different person.

Studies on *The Summer Before The Dark* have been conducted from various perspectives such as feminism, psychological analysis, characteristic analysis, Bildungsroman, Sufism, etc. I will develop my analysis of the novel from the mirror images of the heroine and the various implications.

According to Lacan, somewhere between the age of six and eighteen months, we enter a so-called “looking — glass or mirror stage”(Bressler 129). In this stage, we literally see ourselves in a mirror while metaphorically seeing ourselves in others image, say, in our mother’s image. Observing this mirror image permits us to perceive images that have discrete boundaries, allowing us to become aware of ourselves as independent beings that are separate from others or our mothers.

Throughout the novel, Kate is depicted looking into mirrors many times, and while she studies her images in the mirrors, adjusting her physical appearance according to different standards, she is actually being through different psychological states, the changes of which reveal the process of her inner growth, maturing, and attaining a final integrated self. Kate’s mirror image changes before and after her journey shows her psychological changes, which illustrate that her journey in the physical world is actually a significant psychological journey of self-seeking.

### **Mirror Images before the Journey**

It is generally admitted that while people especially women are approaching middle age, the female glamour will retard, having no appealing in appearance, fat in body, weak in mental state, even having no love orientations, then they will become bad-tempered, out of date in thinking and manner, and slower in some organs. However, this is not true of Kate Brown in *The Summer Before The Dark*.

Before the summer journey begins, we see that Kate often stands in front of the mirror to make sure that she is pretty, loveable and elegant. The appearance and image that she tries to keep in the mirror resonate with the role that she has been playing in and out of the family; both are up to the traditional standard and up to the expectations of others rather than her own.

Kate looks younger than her middle age, “Ripeness is all. But in Kate’s case it would not at all... tinting her hair, keeping her weight down, following the fashions carefully so that she would be smart but not mutton dressed as lamb” (8).<sup>1</sup> Kate is a woman who follows the major trends in society, “a woman in a white dress, white shoes, a pink scarf around her neck”, “dressed suitably for a family afternoon”, “her hair was done in large soft waves around a face where a few freckles had been allowed to remain on the bridge of her nose and her upper cheeks”.(10) So though approaching middle age, Kate is beautiful, fashionable and sexually attractive in shape, and she is fully conscious of keeping that way. However it is clear that her eagerness to stay young, attractive and be in the fashion is only for others’ sake, “her husband always said he liked them (the hair) there”(10).

Kate is a responsible and serviceable mother and wife, an excellent supporter, a nurse or nanny for her family members in their needs, materially and spiritually. “She would be a base for members of the family coming home from university, or dropping in for a day or week on their way somewhere else; she would housekeep for them, their friends, their friends’ friends. She would be available, at everyone’s disposal”(13). Approaching middle aged, she has gained a lot of experiences and can deal with matters quite easily, like running the house, taking care of the house, etc. , and like a servant, Kate is ready to meet everyone’s needs, and even quite enjoys burying herself in housekeeping work, servicing others, “She was looking forward to it: not only to the many people, but the managing, the being conscious of her efficiency; she looked forward, too, to a summer’s exert gardening”(13). Her contentment comes not from her inner self, but from satisfying others and being recognized by others. Also, when Kate is offered the translator’s job, she takes it only because her husband wants her to do so, and only because it is for his pride and it is for their son Tim’s sake.

Besides, Kate is happy with the image she and her family make for other women and families. “Her first child had been born when she was twenty-two. The last was

born well before she was thirty. When she offered these facts to others, many envied her; a large number of people, in many countries, knew the Michael Browns as an enviable family”(22). Kate enjoys being treated respectably by people in her area at Byron Park Road.

To conclude, the image of Kate in the beginning of the novel shows that Kate is a traditional middle class woman in a well-to-do family. Though she is in her forties, she remains beautiful in appearance and shape, having appealing glamour that attract her husband and other people. In personality, she is sympathetic, serviceable and sensitive and observant, being an angel devoted to her husband and children. She is always fitting in her movements with those of her children and her husband. And she behaves for the expectations of others and seems to be happy with that, too.

However, these are all the ice above the sea. Actually Kate is intellectual and intelligent. She is clever and has finished school early, with a gap of three years before she goes to university of Oxford. She is good at her various languages, and has excellent understanding competence and cognitive ability, “she sometimes did translating for him or his colleagues. She had once even translated a Portuguese novel, which earned her little money, but much praise” (18).

Also Kate is sensitive and thoughtful. “A woman stood on her back step, arms folded, waiting. Thinking? She would not have said so. She was trying to catch hold of something, or to lay it bare so that she could look and define; for some time now she had been ‘trying on’ ideas like so many dresses off a rack” (3). She has always been in thinking and observes the surroundings quite carefully. “Arms folded” indicate Kate gets used to the solidarity for thinking.

So while she seems to be always happily catering others, she feels greatly anguished and suppressed too, especially when she has felt the unfair treatment from her family members: she has been adaptive to her family for the past years without being given gratitude. “There has to be give and take in any marriage. She was quite aware that she was disinclined to examine this area too closely” (12). “she was feeling dismissed, belittled, because the problem of the house was being considered so unimportant”(22). She hides all her real feelings and forces herself to wear the appropriate smile, sometimes sweet, and sometimes humorous and ironic.

The separation of her acting image and her inner mind can be seen in many aspects. Kate makes her hair style the way her husband always likes. She wears shoes and stocking and dress proper for a middle class family. While for her real thought, she will “go barefooted, to discard her stockings, and to wear something like a muumu or a sari or a sarong — something of that sort — with her hair straight to her shoulders”(10). She scales herself down, acting like a mother never giving rein to her own nature. But inside herself, she is depressed, desperate, feeling belittled and

unfairness in the family. She wears masks to hide her emotions but her mind and heart are in chaos.

So when offered the translating job of Global Food, “she felt like a long-term prisoner who knows she is going to have to face freedom in the morning” (16). Kate wants to embrace this longed freedom. But still she hesitates when thinking of Tim who has no plan for the holiday and who she thinks she will take care. It is to be inferred then that Kate has always being in the moral struggle between performing the traditional role of a sacrificing mother and wife and the eagerness to run away from it.

### **Mirror Images on the Journey**

Thanks to the fact that all her families have something to engage on for the summer, Kate is able to spare some time for herself for a journey outside home, first working as a translator and then exploring randomly at will. Being far away from household responsibilities, Kate starts a life completely at her own choice, and more importantly, while confronted with new situations, she is constantly prompted to reflect on her past life and gains fruitful psychological revelation.

The mirror appears 13 times on Kate’s journey, and the number claims the its importance, indicating the images in the mirror at different times closely related to Kate’s self-reevaluation and self-seeking process. By analyzing the various situations of Kate’s looking into the mirror, the exact images in the mirror, and Kate’s meditations aroused, we can peer into Kate’s journey of inner world.

The first time Kate watches herself in a mirror on the journey is when she works for the Global Food and goes to buy dresses for a meeting in Istanbul. She accepts the request from Charlie Cooper to do the organizational preparation for the meeting. By then, her first translating job in the Global Food for two weeks has ended and she has performed excellently. She enjoys the atmosphere of ease and the pleasant feeling there, and is usually too exhausted to think. While in the second week, the pressure is less and she has time to think, “lying awake later since she was not exhausted, she thought that her firstfunction that of being a skilled parrot was being supplanted by one she was used to”(33). She had become what she was: a nurse, or a nanny, like Charlie Cooper. A mother. Never mind, in a few days she would be free of it all” (33). This shows that Kate unconsciously applies her serviceable ability to others into her work and this time she reveals her true feeling to get rid of the mother role in work. Then she is promoted to the organizational side. She sees a “very undermining ‘humorous’ grimace which nullify her official or daylight view of herself”(38). Kate begins to take off the mask at daytime and think. She sees “a pleasant-looking fashionable woman on the verge of middle age, “She could say, as she looked dispassionately at her image, that her shape, her attributes, limbs, waist, breasts,

mouth, hair, neck, were not different from the equipment with which she had attracted a dozen young men nearly a quarter of century ago; no difference, perhaps even better; since so much chemistry and medication and dieting and attention to hair, teeth, and eyes had gone into this artifact”(40). Just as I have explained in the third chapter that Kate is a woman who cares for her appearance, follows fashion and is quite beautiful. Seeing herself in the mirror, she wonders about the change of women’s attractiveness throughout age and the essence of marriage blueprinted by Michael and her when she suddenly realizes that in her marriage she is expected to be sexy and loyal to only one man, her husband, while her husband is never set to one woman, her. The self of Kate awakens.

The second time she looks into the mirror is when she makes up a glossy, gleaming and silky look in the hairdresser’s, which shows the evocation of her young self. Then in the public room, men are attracted by herself “a woman with startling dark-red hair, a vey white skin, and the sympathetic eyes of a loving spaniel” (48), but she wants to be alone and think, “If she observed carefully, unblended by personal vanity or prejudice, it was noticeable that this approaching man, whatever age he was, hesitated almost imperceptibly as he saw she was not a fresh thirty. But he always sat down and seemed pleased enough with what he found: which was an amiable companion for the coffee table” (48). Kate realizes that she can do the organization job well just because “she was unable to switch herself out of the role of provider of invisible manna, consolation, warmth, ‘sympathy’. Not because she needed a job, or wanted to do one. She had been set like a machine by twenty odd years of being a wife and mother” (52). This shows that women in society have been stereotyped as mother and wife and have generated the “sympathetic” personality automatically. However, Kate dislikes of her urge to love and give which seems to her now like a slave and dog.

When she is in Spain with Jeffery, Kate looks at herself not with a glass mirror but with a bosom mirror, which elevates her understanding of her marriage and her role in the family. Her marriage with Michael is based on rational type, “Discussing everything was the root and prop of their marriage” (60). The two books, *The Conquest of Happiness* for Michael and *Ideal Marriage* for Kate are the documents which guide them to arrange the marital things. For this reason, when she knows about her husband’s affairs, Kate is greatly hurt, loses respect for him and disgusts his behaviors. As to her role in the family, “all those years now seemed like a betrayal of what she really was. While her body, her needs, her emotions — all of herself — had been turning like a sunflower after one man, all that time she had been holding in her hands something else, the something precious offering it in vain to her husband, to her children to everyone she knew — but it had never been taken, had not been noticed” (85). Kate realizes that her full devotion to her family and her true love for them go

unaccepted, or even unnoticed, let alone treasured. The subjectivity of Kate grows bigger and stronger. However, when she gets ill on the journey, she wants to go back home for the familiarity and the warmth, though her soul self thinks it mad to return.

After she gets ill and leaves Jeffery, she went back, but can only stay in the hotel since her house is still being let out, a crucial moment for Kate because she almost returns home. she sees in the mirror “a greenish-white face that had flaring scarlet on the cheekbones, and lank slabs of tarnished red hair falling over it, the grey was pushing up fast, the bones of the face were prominent, the skin creased and shabby”(128). Kate seems weak and old because her reflection and repulsiveness about men’s sex affair and her eagerness for the family warmth in sickness tortures her and tires her. Her dead-white face has changed into greenish-white. “Green” associates with illness, but also indicates a new beginning of Kate’s self. She takes a bus to have a look at her house, only to find people watch her for her bad image. Her neighbors, even her best friend, Mary do not recognize her due to her change in shape. She realizes the shallowness of friendship and the loose ties among “knowing people.” She sees that people are all wearing different masks and women are the pleasing actresses who put on different identities and act what they are expected from both men and women. Back in the hotel room, with her hand mirror she looks into her face and sees a true self, “since that morning, the dry brassy crinkly mass of hair had got worse, and her face was an old woman’s”(177). For years Kate has spent requisite amount of time in front of many different mirrors only to learn to see exactly what her husband sees, and she realizes the role she played, a pleasing one, acting what she is expected to.

Living in Maureen’s flat, Kate comes to understand better of mother-daughter relationship and man-woman problems, which helps her assume a healthy subject self. Maureen is about Eileen’s age, and together with her, Kate acts like a mother but not in the same way she does in her family. She treats Maureen as an independent individual who can make her own choice of life. She accompanies her, but never suffocates or imposes her ideas on her. They both are seeking for self identity, supporting each other as a friend. When encountering Maureen’s friends in casual dresses and quite undecorated way, Kate feels upset and embarrassed. “She saw herself in the long mirror: there was nothing for it but to laugh at what she saw it. Five faces stared at a skeleton in a shocking-yellow robe, her hair in a dry mass around a worried face” (196-197). Still she is behaving herself largely on the basis of outside evaluation and expectation. However, Maureen’s friendliness has saved her. “Why didn’t you come into the kitchen before? You must, any time”(199).An equal and normal mother-daughter like relationship is then built, which helps Kate retain more of the subjective self. Maureen also helps her to see through man’s nature

of appearance-orientation. Because of her change in appearance and shape, Kate becomes an invisible woman, unnoticed by people around, but she soon discovers that by just putting on fittest clothes and proper gestures, women even at their forties like her can generate plenty of attentions and glances from men. "Kate stood in front of the long mirror looking at the slim decorative woman — the haggardness of her face had as it were been absorbed by the over-all impression of an amenable attractiveness — and flung off the dress, put on one of those that folded and sagged, shook her hair out, and walked out into the evening"(205). By watching herself in the mirror, Kate knows that her looks and dress makes a big difference. And she realizes the fact that women are always tuned to men's responses. "Men's attention is stimulated by signals no more complicated than what leads the gosling; and for all her adult life, her sexual life, she had been conforming, twitching like a puppet to those strings..."(241)

So when walking across the building place, she finds that her fittest clothes attracts men's whistles, calls and invitations while a small transformation will have the opposite effect, she is in rage. "She was trembling with rage: it was a rage, it seemed to her, that she had been suppressing for a lifetime. This is what you have been doing for years and years and years" (242). She finally realizes that women have always been living as individuals without subjectivity and souls, and her rage here is sharply pointed to the man-dominated society and patriarchy culture. "Love, and duty, and being in love and not being in love, and loving and behaving well and you should and you shouldn't ask and you ought and oughtn't. It's a disease" (252). Kate defines these as invisible chains of demands and expectations for women which have restrained women's personality. Kate no longer feels sad when she is unnoticed, for she is learning to prioritize her own inner feeling and self evaluation to demands and expectations from the outside society, a revelation of the self-seeking process.

### **Mirror Images after the Journey**

The summer journey is about to end, and Kate decides to go home. While she is shopping for presents for her family "She saw herself in windows; her body was back in recognizable shape. Her face had aged. Noticeable" (269). Her hair is undyed, rough and streaky and the widening grey band is prominent. But Kate, with new understanding of self, with vital energy and hope for a new life, cares nothing about those at all.

In the past, she dresses for her husband and children, obeying exactly the dos and don'ts set by conventions and traditions. But now, she has her own judgments and follows her own rules. She would do what she feels like. She would walk into her home with her hair undressed, with her hair tied-straight back for utility; rough and streaky with the widening grey part undyed. Before the journey, Kate is depressed,

raged and desperate in the state of madness. However, after the journey, she thinks she will become a free woman or new born child full of life and hope. Never would it happen again that her little bits be distributed to every member of the family. She becomes an integrated woman who will not live for others. In the past, she has ignored and hid many thoughts and true feelings. Though she feels agonized, raged, and mad, but she never has the courage to step forward to face with the reality. She just tortures herself in the pain. But after the journey, she has got the strength and courage to live for herself. Her life is full of hope now, like a rising sun just lights the darkness.

Kate will be still a mother, but now she sees the role in a new way. She understands that the family always had times of enjoyment in being together and this was true even when there was antagonism between the young ones and the parents. And she concludes “what it all amounted to was that because family life was difficult at times, because Kate played the role she had to, a mother who had to be resisted, fought, reacted against, because she wasn’t always loved and appreciated, then she had to damn it all, see it all as black, as ugly...” (261) Furthermore, she realizes that a woman is born to be a mother — that’s how nature has decided and in a marriage the two take their own part with their own problems. In a balanced tie, a harmonious family is created. She also realizes that she should treat her kids as young adults with their grown-up. With these epiphanies, with a positive and initiative attitude to the responsibility of being a mother, Kate will surely get relieved from feeling burdensome raising children the way she felt in the past, and she will surely have an afresh new life.

Kate will still be a wife, but she will no longer tolerate the injustice and hurt from the man. She would do what she likes and never please the man and behave in the box set by man and society. She has got the fundamental idea of man. She shall never have any illusion from man. She realizes the nature of man being easily seduced by appearance and treating women like emotionless sex toy. In emotional world, women live like a sunflower just for one man while man chases after the titillation and lust. She longs for the mutual respect for the partner of the marriage. She strongly condemns the sex trade and love affairs just for pleasure. The integration of soul and body is of great importance to her.

Throughout the novel *The Summer Before The Dark*, Kate is depicted to have spent more than ten times standing in front of a mirror or a shop window to watch herself. Images in the mirror reflect the looks and appearance of Kate at different stages, but also indicate her psychological state at different times, especially her understanding of subjectivity and its relation with others, or the outside world.

Kate is a typical conventional middle-class housewife. Unlike Lessing’s other women

protagonists who either go through the passive choice of marriage or live up with the bad marriage experience, Kate has a ideal marriage and a good life admired and envied by other women. Before the journey, she is a pretty and supportive wife, a catering and serviceable mother, an angel in the family. However, inside herself, she is agonized, depressed, suppressed and desperate, for she feels the inequality in marriage and the intolerance of her children. She consciously ignores her true feelings just because she wants to maintain the surface happiness and peace of the family. Despite the "humorous" grimace on her face, she is inwardly in chaos and madness.

When the journey, Kate throws off the restrains from family responsibilities and her physical changes of Kate in mirror have been through four phases. First, the housewife unattractive style with healthy and beautiful shape in the first week in the Global Food; second, the attractive woman style in the following work period in the organization; and third, the diminishing of beauty and attractiveness after the journey with her lover Jeffery; and forth, the recovery of her shape after the journey.

Together with the physical changes are the psychological changes of Kate. She has been through from the phase of living for others to the one of living for herself. As the journey begins, she leaves home and buries herself in work at first week; she has no one to please. Then Kate's self awakes and she changes her style to an attractive woman just for herself. When in the love affair with Jeffery, Kate intends not to please that man but she fails to for her partner is sick and she has to attend him. When in the hotel and the Maureen's flat, she has experienced and peered on the pleasing role of women in men's eyes and the appearance oriented nature of man. She is finally free from this bondage of expectations and pleasing role. Also, she no longer masks or ignores on purpose her true feelings, summoning courage to break the ice to be herself and to change her situation if she feels unfair.

The summer journey also gives her new perspectives, leading to her reversed attitude about the family or child-care, changing from self-hatred as a mother and wife to initiative to take the share of it. In the past, she devotes all herself to her children like a fat goose under great pressure while she is not appreciated, loved and needed by them. She feels it a burden for her. However, after the journey, she realizes that as a woman she is sure to give birth and raise children. That is the mission. But to be a mother does not mean to be a slave. Just by having proper involvement in children's life and treating them as independent adults with respect, harmonious mother-child relationship will be just at a hand's reach.

*The Summer Before The Dark* gives light to the liberation of woman to some extent although it does not offer a golden way for identity-seeking. Kate's deep-rooted traditional ideas has led to the result that she puts herself in the position as an angel in the family. But she is an intellectual, and she is quite sensitive for her

rational thoughts and true feelings about the injustice in such a role. That is what causes her suffering. By unfolding her masks and facing with truth, Kate has found her new self, an integrated self just for her not for others. Her work efficiency and excellence during the journey shows that women can be the backbones of social work like man. Her final return indicates that women shall take the responsibility of family, and the liberation of women shall not go extreme, since it shall mean life and hope rather than destruction. What is important is that women can find themselves free and independent and forge their own individual personality.

### Note

1. The quotes of the novel used in this paper are all taken from Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before The Dark*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2000.) In this paper only the number of the page where the specific quote locates is given.

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