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**THE CIRCULAR STRUCTURE OF LESSING'S *BRIEFING FOR A  
DESCENT INTO HELL***

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**ABSTRACT**

Dorris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* presents a circular journey that the protagonist Charles Watkins, a Classics professor goes through. Taken in a hospital, Charles suffers from amnesia. Ironically what he has forgotten seems to have made him ready for the journey that he is about to take into his inner self. As the novel progresses, it is made clear that this journey is not to be taken to remember the orthodoxy that he has forgotten but to remember what orthodoxy has made him forget. Through this journey, Charles Watkins gathers bits and pieces of information on what has been made to forget. While the novel thematically revolves around this issue of inner journey into the self, structurally the novel revolves around the same or similar patterns that are being established in the course of the novel. In this way, while Charles is on his own journey, the reader is also forced to take part in his journey as he/ she is forced to work out his or her way through the similar patterns to make meaning through the reading process. Charles and the reader find certain variations of a similar pattern in themes, narration and in the symbolism that all suggest the circularity of the whole novel. In each time Charles and the reader goes through the similar patterns, a new link is made to the already existent knowledge, leading to a self that knows more itself than it has never experienced before.

**Key Words:** *Dorris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, circular, structure, symbolism, narration, structuralism, archetypes, Sufis.*

The Structure of *Lessing's Briefing for a Descent into Hell* complies with the theme and at the same time the reader is made to explore the theme on the structural level. Lessing's protagonist, Charles Watkins, a Professor of Classics, goes through an inner journey to see the depths and heights of all living, ironically through forgetting what orthodoxy have taught him. This journey, unexpectedly neither follows a linear order nor has a fragmentational nature. As Lessing signals in the title and the epitaph, it is a movement directed to inside of oneself, it is thus knowing oneself and through oneself every other being. In this respect the journey, as theme, structure and symbolism feverishly point, is circular. This is mainly for the reason that it is necessary in the first place that Charles Watkins must remember that which he made to forget and this has to be through one unique way that is a circular path, revolving around the same line, uncovering what is not known but is already there, until he reaches a certain recognition.

The inner journey that Watkins takes does not seem to be the result of a psychotic breakdown but rather it is a tool that necessitates repeated reconsiderations or discoveries of what has been taken for granted. It then has to follow a circular path and have to make use of archetypal experiences. The comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1972) notes that "... the universal formula also of the mythological journey... interpreted from this point of view, a schizophrenic breakdown is an inward and backward journey to recover something missed or lost, and to restore thereby a vital balance." (p.202) The journey into oneself, thus does not point to a linear path but rather has goings forwards and backwards as in Charles' case. Its not being linear suggests that Charles would not reach an ultimate truth that is to be reached through the traditional up-going line. Charles has to find what is already there and what is missed by the orthodoxy. In this way, his journey has to be circular to fit to the form and aim of this psychic experience. This paper, then strives to explore how Lessing employs this circular form on the structural and thematic levels, incorporating both to achieve the desired effect.

As Northrop Frye has pointed out, the motifs of descent and ascent are patterns in romance tradition in literature, in which idyllic and demonic experiences form the extreme ends as the narrative oscillates between desired and the unwanted (2006). This pattern also exists in the esoteric traditions. The Sufis describe man's evolutionary path as starting from the simplest forms passing through vegetable, animal, human, suprahuman and finally reaching an acknowledgement of the external higher existence (Shah, 1977). In these similar ways of journey, what is common, though reached through various ways, is that the collective unconscious' manifesting itself in the similar archetypal images and symbols that lead to discover and/or rediscover.

Before moving to the thematical concerns and symbolism, the surface structure of the novel deals with the reworkings of the various narratives to make the reader gather pieces of information as in the experience of journeying into the collective unconscious through the reworking the material that is already there. The opening part of the novel, including Charles's narrative of his psychic voyage in his mind revolves around similar ideas, symbols and notions that Charles reworks or rediscovers to give his journey a meaning and accordingly, the reader is posited also as a reworker of Charles' experience as he discovers and rediscovers along the way with Charles. After this inner narrative of Charles the section which involves the circulation of letters similarly explores and revolves around certain ideas and symbols that are found in the previous section. Moreover, they form a circular movement with the rest of the chapters. These letters written by Charles himself and his *milieu* while helping the reader to gain bits of information of the identity of Charles also takes us to the outside of the psychic narrative. While inscribing the outside world, every speaker has to rewrite his or her own experiences similarly to Charles in the very way that Charles recreates in amnesia. These narratives too in content and symbolism correspond to one another and to the rest of the book.

Novel opens when Charles adrift in the currents of the Atlantic, oarless and alone, unable to think of anything to do to get away from the situation he is in. His helplessness on the ocean foremostly points to the metaphorical advent of the appearance of humanity as Charles is very much in need of getting out of this chaotic situation to a solid ground to begin his "ascent." Though his loneliness and helplessness are emphasized, Charles recollects that he was on a raft with his friends who were taken up by a disc but he was abandoned. This information signals in the narrative a forward movement as Charles seems to be in necessity to find them. However, as the narrative continues, it is slowly revealed that Charles by intuition knows that he first has to first embark on an island to explore, use it to his needs and possibly to find his missing friends or that the island provides another step to continue to the narrative. The reader, then, at this point is left with two choices whether Charles will find a way to continue to his metaphorical ascend as in the actual evolution of life from water to land or unlike this rather selfish ascend he will seek to unify with his friends by being taking up by the mysterious disc, forming dilemma in the flow of the narrative.

However it is not only the dilemma in the narrative sense that the reader is challenged, the reader has to work out the identity of narrator and foremostly the reason why he is kept at the hospital.

The reader then has to gather pieces of information that are randomly posited as the reworkings of themes, symbols and notions of mythology that Charles, as a professor teaches. While the narrative seems to be moving to clarify the problem by revealing other sides to the main issue, the reader is sustained to gather meaning not through the unfolding plot that seems to be getting nowhere but by working through symbols that are formed randomly on a circular path. Thus, the reader has to unify what is in pieces yet not pointing to a certain meaning as Charles who at the very beginning of the novel and finally aims at unifying with his friends as opposed to the metaphorical ascent over nature and thus the linear line that the narrative should follow.

The section concerning Charles' exploration of the island is metaphorically structured on an upward moving line. Charles, upon embarking on the island, builds his environment into his needs as well as his psychological and biological self as in the actual phase of forming culture and civilization. Charles manages to appease his needs of hunger and shelter which are not conveyed as man's overruling the nature but Charles' pure existence that is one with nature. He seems to be perfectly in tune with the nature and the friendly animals that help and accompany him. He knows nothing in the sense of destructing or of exploiting nature. This, as it is hinted many times before, points to the notion of unifying that is still unknown at this stage of the novel yet is emphasized by Charles's growing need of getting into the disc. His desire and need to be taken up by the disc which is conveyed as a higher existence that has a unifying force are in complete contrast with the humanity's selfish needs to live by destructing carelessly, though this is rendered as humanity's great "success" over nature. Thus the way to civilization that takes human endeavour metaphorically reminds an upward moving path yet this path as in Charles case, even at early section of the novel is continuously broken by the feverish suggestions of the disc and Charles' need to be taken up by it.

The section on the island in which peace rules ends with the appearance of the orgiastic women that takes Charles on a new level of understanding. When Charles was not aware of himself as a separate existence, the scene in which initiates the appearance of the women is heavily symbolic in terms of the binary oppositions that Charles has to recognize. He feels disturbingly attracted to the moon and at this very stage he differentiates between sun and moon as he calls himself "the Sun's child" (Lessing, 1971 p.55). Charles knows that he is somewhat connected with the women and even hints that he may be the one who killed one of the cattle. Moreover, he is immediately driven to the feast that brings evil on the island and makes Charles confront that it is his own evil side. With the animal cut up, whole world is divided into binary oppositions as Charles further gets into a frenzy of being "moon mad and lunatic" (Lessing, p.55).

As the island changes with the feast of the women, Charles at every step comes to discover what he really is rather than investing effort to change his environment to rule over the nature. Charles regards himself lunatic and has to wait that third full moon for the descent of the Crystal to take him in. Unlike what he thinks, being moon mad does not make him unqualified to be taken up, on the contrary it is required that he experience binary oppositions that do exist in himself and have to be recognized. Charles further witnesses with the changing atmosphere of the island with the appearance of the apes and rat dogs who constantly fight and mate along with the meat devouring, causing the island being polluted with corpses. Where was harmony now chaos reigns. Charles does not attempt to stop such disturbing processes yet he is well aware of that he is one of them in terms of flesh eating and carnality. As in the early blocking the forward movement plot, Charles knows by intuition that he has to complete a kind of union also in himself that have taken place in knowing himself in circular movement.

Charles' reaching the ancient city also proves to be misleading for the city is not construction of the forward moving line of evolution of man yet serves as a tool to discover and rediscover the self in a circular movement. The city, Charles discovers, is unlike the contemporary capitalist ones it is organic and welcoming. Rather than settling in the city or causing yet another rupture in the chaotic lives of fighting and mating apes and rat dogs, Charles still holds his determination to be taken up the disc. In order to this, he has to keep the city square clean for he had to face the results that chaos yielded and that prepare city square to a union of the opposing sides of him which is what mandala symbolizes. Mandala is basically a circle in square with rich shapes and ornaments in each of them. As Jaffé (1964) explains;

whether in classical or primitive foundations, the mandala ground plan was never dictated by aesthetics or economics. It was a transformation of the city into an ordered cosmos, a sacred place, bound by its centre to the other world... Every building, sacred or secular, that has a mandala ground plan is the projection of an archetypal image from within the unconscious onto the outer world. The city, the fortress, and the temple become symbols of the psychic wholeness... (p.243)

Mandala thus gives way to many interpretations of the unions of the contrasting phenomena however as the chapter and the early and next chapter emphasize, it is possibly the revelation and the projection of the unconscious to the conscious rational world, thereby forming a connection. It could also be the union of men and nature, rational and unrational, sun and moon, and such.

Mandala's symbolism is extended with the great white bird who settles on it to provide a further viewing of the destructions that takes place on the Earth. The great white bird is rich with symbolism, the most appropriate here being its providing a redemptive process. It is still in the self of the Charles that narratives revolve. He at this very point knows very well that all the evil he has faced is both his own evil, such as the women, and apes and rat dogs. He laments as "... I understood my fall away from what I had been when I landed... into a land which had never known killing... I had drawn evil into my surroundings, into me..." (Lessing, 1971 p.58) Thus, in order to have another kind of realization in himself, he has to be redeemed. Like his own evil on the island, he is taken to be shown this time vast scale of destructive processes on the whole earth. Rubenstein tends to call this a "further ascent into enlightenment." (Lessing, p.218). However as Lessing strictly avoids to connect Charles to a metaphorical evolution, this could only be another step to return to what he has been "ascending" from. After Charles recognizes his self in this context and in the early ones, he is ready to be taken in the Crystal.

The long sought after disc forms the towering metaphor in these early chapters and as the novel progresses in the whole book. Disc has a circular shape that operates as if it breaks every being into its atoms yet also keeps their original shape, uniting every other being who are all have their greater part and minor part in the whole union yet all are equal. Its shape corresponds metaphorically what Charles had been experiencing until this time: "... the action begins... at the outermost circle or spiral of the unconscious and contracts towards its termination". (Bolling, 1974 p.137) It is this absolute circular pattern that the whole novel follows that Charles has to come to full recognition in his experience which takes place revolving around the same line, in great contrast with the linear path. They were all aimed at recognition of the self and unifying the self with itself and the outer world.

Charles, inside the crystal, has another view of what he had actually experienced on the island, joining his seemingly opposing sides. He observes: "It was the mind of humanity that I saw, but this not all to be separated from animal mind... nor it was a question of higher or lower, for just as my having drunk blood and eaten flesh with the poor women had been a door, a key... in this spin of fusion like a web whose every strand is linked and vibrates with each other... and this harmony runs in a strengthened pulse of which it is a cord." (Lessing, 1975 p.97) In this phase, Charles is introduced to another level of recognition that is now seemingly beyond himself yet at the same time he is a part of it. He acknowledges that his joining in the feast of the women had led him to another level of understanding in his own self that he did not now or confronted before.

This passage initiates the second part of Charles' journey in a circle, now partly gained knowledge on side the of his self, he can have a look at the world in which he can recognize: "... humanity and animal life and reptile life and insect life and- all these variations are all little crusts on this globe. Motes and microbes." (Lessing, p.98) Charles manages to connect every being into one greater system in which every being has their significant part for the system and for themselves. This being so, then Charles seemingly reduces humanity even to "motes and microbes", even though he sees no difference between any other living. This realization takes us to the first section of the island episode where Charles felt and acted perfectly in tune with nature simply because he did not conceived himself as separate being from his environment. As this proved to be not sufficient, then he had to confront the evil side of his own existence as he now, reached a certain point at the circle, can appreciate even the minuscule living forms who even contribute to the whole system and which are equal to humans.

On the next section, Charles, accordingly what he has just realized, becomes a celestial being, "a minuscule planet of the sun" (Lessing, p.100) and gets another chance to view a large scale of humanity's destructive side. He witnesses that on the earth people fight, oceans' being polluted by corpses and more significantly, humanity's obsession with "... I, I, I..." instead of "... we, we, we..." (Lessing, p.106) This destruction in the large scale again makes Charles discover his own destructive side as his sudden realization that he caused the death of the one of the cattle. He knows that he is equally responsible for all the destruction and selfishness that humanity has caused.

When Charles partly completes his self discovery, the section of the circulations of the letters starts, taking us to the outside world, functioning as a part that allows the reader to work out the experience of Charles. The reader is made in this section of the circulation of the letters to find similar experiences conveyed in similar ideas and tones. Through Charles' own writing and his *milieu* who had underwent similar phases, Lessing makes the reader rewrite Charles' own experiences, all the others and eve his/her construction through the reading process at the same time. While the reader reads through his *milieu*, he/she recreates Charles in them and also he/she finds similar expressions of similar experiences that Charles went through. As Charles progressively comes to terms with the idea of union and equality of all beings in his reworkings of his mental material, the reader is made to work and rework to through the letters and early parts of the novel, revolving around the same themes and symbols to discover and rediscover.

One of the women of Charles' *milieu*, Rosemary Baines touches upon the problem of the young who cannot get proper education to free themselves but who are forced into to lose their activeness through the process of learning. Baines laments this and looks for a new mode of learning and education that would give the individual their own value and tie him or her properly to the whole society. This, Baines discovers at one of Charles' lectures, he is describing what she is looking for being awake in order to get educated. She writes: "why is what happens, what is provided, always so dull, flat and negligible compared with what any ordinary person in the street can imagine as possible and desirable..." (Lessing, 1975 p.166) and that "... no young thing learning there could ever believe that human beings are more important than their institutions." (p.168) She realizes that indoctrinating children will only make them abide by social constructions by making them miss their own wholeness and connection with the outer world. Sleepless becomes the moral conduct but they have to keep awakennes to be able to rework what is given. Her experience parallels Charles' who uncovers already existing structures by subverting them through their own working way to reach a recognition of wholeness.

Baines then, moves on to the experience of Larson whose functionality in terms of theme and structure operates at two levels. First, his findings and reconsiderations of his excavations in Asia Minor and Africa deeply resonates with the Charles inner journey into his unconscious where he had to dig in, as it were, to be able to conduct a reworking of what is there. Larson finds that there is more to the already speculated and at the same time, he discovers that all differences are just fabrications of the similar things that humans have been creating and recreating to construct their own cultures. This is also structural in a circular path and resembles Charles' mental reworkings. Larson attempts at various excavations returning to the same spots, resulting in returnings and reworkings the data that is found there. As for his stammering, he finds another stream of thoughts that parallel the ones that he owns.

Like new data found in excavations, this stammering, forming a new line suggest a union. Rosemary Baines recalls Larson's archaeological doubts of what had been taken for granted in the case of existence of earlier civilizations. Larson reworks what had been taught as the ultimate truth in his various excavations, especially in Asia Minor and Africa where many civilizations had been founded and exterminated. Forming a connection between them, and through his claim that earlier civilizations might have existed where once not thought of, he moves on this metaphorical line to discover what he had missed before, leading to new assumptions and thus larger appreciations of all living: "... certain ideas were accepted, sometimes for decades and centuries, dominating archaeology: then suddenly they were doubted.

That 'Greece was the mother of the Western civilization and Rome its daddy' directed archaeology and excavation for a long time yet... Arabs, Moors, and Saracens were parents to 'western civilization'..." (Lessing, p.180) Rather than separating as the sciences do, Larson looks for a unity and realises bases of the sameness that is enlarged by reconstructions and that as Charles does, all is one and equal.

Stammering corresponds to Charles' amnesia by which Charles is able to rewrite what he has been taught as a linear path that goes upwards as humanity's course of civilization. However, instead of this linear path, Charles, when he is mad or rather when he is outside the orthodoxy, follows a circular path to rewrite as Larson does when stammering, like excavating, the empowered discourse breaks up: "... he noted that as he talked, another stream of words paralleled the stream of words that he was actually using, and this parallel stream expressed opinions not precisely to those he was actually using ... they were crazy, dotty, batty, cranky." (Lessing, p.175) Its as if the semiotic is trying get into the symbolic, deforming it to make itself heard. Thus, the linear movement of the discourse is broken, the supposed line of ascendancy of the human race over nature humanity that is represented and perpetuated by Larson's lectures become insignificant. It does not rise to an upward position that would reign all other beings but makes Larson find another way to explore what had been absent form all along. By breaking only upward moving, phallus like discourse, Larson can express another stream of thought that somehow captures oneness in plurality. It is also Charles' stammering that had the same effect:

while his marks have been scattered, there was an inner logic to them, a thread, which sounded at first like repetition of certain words and ideas. Sometimes it seemed as if the sound, not the meaning of a word or syllable in a sentence, gave birth to the next sentence or word. When this happened it gave the impression of superficiality, of being 'scatty' or demented. (Lessing, p. 218)

Catching with up the sounds and making them to use to form another ring of sounds that would seemingly have a meaning suggests Charles's reworking of classical mythology, turning and returning to every stop to make of use what he has know. This also corresponds to the readers' role who apart from establishing an identity for Charles, have to go through all Charles' psychic narratives and letters written from different points of views to work out the inner pattern that at the same time amounts to the whole experience that the whole novel strives to show.

As the narrative moves to Watkins, we get another glimpse of the psychic voyages of Charles. Under the communist rule in Yugoslavia, he talks of a highly romantic union between the partisans.

Elements of this section also correspond to the early chapters with its briefing, Charles' descent by a parachute and most importantly his earthly union with the partisans. Only through this union and greatly through the harmonic idealized love relationship with Konstantina, Charles again manages to reconstruct an Eden-like Earthly lands as in the island at the very beginning: "The world as it was before man filled and fouled it... those vast mountains, in which we moved like the first person on Earth..." (Lessing, p. 212) which is, as usual, followed by the evil. As the appearance of the orgiastic women or the mating of the rat-dogs, Konstantina is fatally wounded by a doe giving birth. Death and birth here may lead us to the circle of life and to the whole novel itself which is like the Crystal's turning around until all oppositions become one and correspond with the greater being so that oppositions such as evil and good and individual and group exist and complete one another.

As Charles slowly surfaces from his deep down voyage, Violet emerges as another figure of what he had been conceptualizing from all along. Both Watkins and Violet share a strange union outside the social norms and that it is posited more complex and having more wisdom to it as in Charles's realization his being one in the whole system. However, as the Earth fouled by the growing numbers of humanity, Charles discerns a line of hatred around Violet. They manage to gather together in their own strangeness in contrast to the outside world only to end in Charles's recovery to orthodoxy.

Lessing calls up a vision of a highly imaginative and at the same rational way of bringing every separations into oneness in which every being is both the part and the whole. Charles, through forgetting what he has learned by orthodoxy, gets into his unconscious, discovering and rediscovering what is already there but covered by orthodoxy. His journey is highly symbolical, structured on a circular line, is realized by the spiral-like Crystal. The reader with Charles too reworks what he gathers from his psychic narrative, letters and accounts to reach, on his/her part, a recognition of the self and of being a part of the whole external world..

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