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DORIS LESSING'İN *BRIEFING FOR A DESCENT INTO HELL* ROMANINDA TRAVMA, HAFIZA VE BİLİNÇ KRİZİ

Cahit BAKIR[1]

ÖZ

Bu makale, Doris Lessing'in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) adlı romanını travma ve bellek çalışmaları çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Lessing'in "iç uzam" romanı, amnezi hâlinde bulunan ve rasyonel ve bilimsel yöntemlerle eski benliğini ve kimliğini yeniden kazanması amacıyla bir psikiyatri hastanesine götürülen Cambridge Üniversitesi Klasik Edebiyat profesörü Charles Watkins'in hikâyesini anlatır. Hastanede bulunduğu süre boyunca Charles, fiziksel dünyanın mekânsal ve zamansal sınırlarını aşar ve kozmik yolculuklar, apokaliptik vizyonlar ve mitik arayışlar biçiminde çeşitli içsel yolculuklara çıkar. Bu makale, Charles'ın hastanede geçirdiği süre boyunca yaşadığı deneyimlerin, travmanın ve alternatif bellek biçimlerinin ifadeleri olarak nitelendirilebileceğini savunmaktadır. Travma kuramı perspektifinden bakıldığında, makale Charles'ın amnezisini bireysel deneyimin sınırlarını aşan ve Batı rasyonalizmi ile bireycilik anlayışını eleştirmek için bir araca dönüşen travmatik bir kırılma olarak yorumlamaktadır. Roman, Charles'ın parçalı anıları ve düşsel yolculukları aracılığıyla, travmanın istikrarlı kimliği parçaladığını, doğrusal zaman anlayışını bozduğunu ve rasyonalitenin sınırlarını altüst ettiğini ortaya koyar. Makale, sonuç olarak Doris Lessing'in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* adlı eserinde kozmik birlik, kolektif bellek ve karşılıklı bağlılık üzerine kurulu aşkın bir alternatif evrene dair ipuçları sunduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Travma, Bellek, Amnezi, Batı rasyonalizmi, Karşılıklı bağımlılık

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TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND THE CRISIS OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN DORIS LESSING'S *BRIEFING FOR A DESCENT INTO HELL*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) through the lens of trauma and memory studies. Lessing's "inner space novel" narrates the story of a Cambridge professor of Classics called Charles Watkins, who is found in a state of amnesia and taken to a psychiatric hospital to restore his former self and identity through rational and scientific methods. While in the hospital, Charles transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries of the physical world and embarks on inner journeys through cosmic voyages, apocalyptic visions, and mythic quests. This article argues that Charles' experiences during his stay at the hospital can be characterized as expressions of trauma and alternative forms of memory. The article, from the perspective of trauma theory, interprets Charles's amnesia as a traumatic rupture that exceeds individual experience and becomes a medium to critique Western rationalism and individualism. Through Charles's fragmented memories and visionary journeys, the novel demonstrates how trauma shatters stable identity, disrupts linear time, subverts rationality. The article concludes that Doris Lessing in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* offers glimpses of a transcendental alternative realm built on cosmic unity, collective memory, and interconnected existence.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Amnesia, Western rationalism, Interconnectedness

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1. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) narrates the story of Charles Watkins, a professor of Classics at Cambridge University. In the very beginning of the novel, Watkins is found by the police with no money or identification on him while rambling on the banks of the Thames near the Waterloo Bridge. Suffering from amnesia, Watkins is brought to a psychiatric hospital where two doctors, who, while disagreeing about methods, are united in their attempt to bring him back to the world of appearances that he has mentally deserted. In the admittance sheet of the hospital, it is only his gender that is known, which indicates Lessing's attempt to get him rid of the constraints of Western male-dominated discourse and fixed identity. To accomplish this, as Şavkay (2010) points out, Watkins must embrace madness and abandon his socially constructed identity to come up with a novel language to express his self, because the cultural discourse that has created him "regards the self as a rational entity and associates it with a male logos'' (p. 12). That is why, throughout the novel, Lessing points out the fact that what matters most is to realize the importance of our remembering and preserving ''an idealist's view of harmony, unity, cosmic betterment'' (Hynes, 1994, p. 233).

Building on this framework, this article argues that *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* can be interpreted through the lens of trauma and memory to show how Doris Lessing challenges dominant Western ideas of the self, reason, and history. From the lens of trauma theory, the article analyses Charles Watkins's amnesia as a traumatic rupture that exceeds individual experience and becomes a medium to critique Western rationalism and individualism, which puts a great deal of emphasis on a stable identity and isolated self. Watkins' fractured sense of self reflects trauma's power to shatter identity. Recovery, in contrast, appears not to be a return to normality but a fragile reconnection to others and to the world. In this context, Charles's visionary memories can also be read through the concept of postmemory, which suggests an indirect form of witnessing that goes beyond personal experience. The article argues that Lessing uses amnesia caused by trauma and visionary experience to challenge Western ideas of individualism, rational thinking, and linear history, and to imagine instead a more profound sense of belonging that is grounded in memory, unity, and cosmic interconnection.

2. DISCUSSION

While in the hospital, Watkins associates himself with archetypal seafarers such as Sinbad, Jason, Odysseus, and Jonah, which confuses the hospital staff. When Charles and Doctor Y are communicating, Doctor Y is unable to understand Watkins' statement: "We are all sailors" (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, 2002, p. 15), because the physicians in the novel are clearly associated with a ''demythologized and dehumanized society and have lost touch with the archetypal dimensions of personal identity'' (Bolling, 1973, p. 555). Therefore, Doctor Y defines himself by his social role as he says he is ''not a sailor but a doctor in the hospital'' (p. 15). In the novel, Charles rejects Doctor X and instead chooses to engage with the nurse and Doctor Y, whom he feels are genuinely present. While Doctor X approaches Watkins' condition from a practical perspective and assumes from the start that the patient is sick, Doctor Y is more willing to listen and understand what is happening in Watkins' mind. However, despite their differences in approach and manner, both doctors see Watkins as a sick man, and they share the same idea of what would constitute a cure. Thus, the title of the physicians as Doctor X, Y, and Z is a clear indication of the ''depersonalized relationships holding between healer and sufferer in modern society'' (Bolling, 1973, p. 555).

In this context, the doctors try to treat Charles by forcing him to recall his former self. However, Charles comes to see his former socially defined identity as a kind of madness, a construct that is shaped by social rules and expectations. As a result, genuine communication between him and the doctors becomes impossible. The doctors interpret his visions as clear signs of mental illness, while Charles believes that their strictly rational language is what truly distorts reality. This clash of perspectives demonstrates the novel's central conflict between institutional reason and a deeper, intuitive form of knowledge that transcends conventional language. As a result, there is a lack of communication between Charles and the doctors when they talk to each other: ''So you are God, too, are you? / You as well. / I do not aim so high, I assure you. / Stupid. You do not have a choice'' (p. 137). Nevertheless, the doctors ultimately succeed through electric shock therapy, in restoring the memories they want him to have and at the end of the book Charles Watkins turns to his former self which suggests that ''the cure is successful but the patient dies'' (Samuelson, 1979, p. 3).

As doctors attempt to diagnose and treat him through rational, scientific methods, Watkins embarks on numerous inner journeys, including cosmic voyages, apocalyptic visions, and mythic quests. He imagines himself drifting across the Atlantic Ocean with eleven companions, guided only by the currents. After a mysterious crystal UFO takes the others away, Watkins continues alone on a raft and eventually lands in Brazil with the assistance of a porpoise. From there, he moves through a peaceful, Eden-like forest where animals live in complete harmony. Then, he discovers the ruins of an ancient city and prepares a space for the crystal to return. His journey subsequently becomes more unsettling, as he views a strange ritual of three women consuming bloody meat, and violent scenes among animals as rat-dogs fight against apes. Later, he is taken away, flown by a great white bird,

and finally lifted by the crystal into a higher realm. In this higher realm, he sees the Earth from above and finds a cosmic message of harmony and unity. After witnessing his own birth and life, he wakes up back in the hospital and completes this profound inner voyage. This sequence of visionary experiences positions Lessing's novel as a depiction of a fragmented, unstable mind rather than a linear narrative. As Liu suggests, it reads as an "inner space novel" without a "general storyline," driven by the protagonist's "frantic hallucinations" and following a "schizophrenic" figure moving between "the heavens and the Earth," as if passing through "hell" and encountering surreal visions (2022, p. 2).

Viewed through the lens of trauma theory, these disjointed and hallucinatory experiences gain further significance. Cathy Caruth (1996) defines trauma as "the narrative of a belated experience" (p. 7), which is neither fully understood nor experienced at the moment it occurs but instead remains unresolved and "returns to haunt the survivor later on" (p. 4). Caruth's definition of trauma offers a productive framework for understanding the collapse and recovery of Charles's identity. The belated experience of trauma, Caruth notes, materializes in the form of visions, nightmares, and hallucinations rather than clear and coherent recollections:

> In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century. (1996, p. 11)

In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Charles's amnesia and visionary journeys can therefore be understood as expressions of a traumatic experience that was never fully grasped when it first occurred. The visionary moments he experiences in the hospital room, such as the planetary conference and the Crystal Disc, can be interpreted as what Caruth calls belated recollections, which help make sense of a traumatic event that was impossible to comprehend at the moment of its occurrence fully. This experience might have turned the traumatic moment into the symbolic and cosmic moments that he experiences while embarking on an inner journey.

During this journey, Charles Watkins identifies with archetypal characters such as Odysseus, Jonah, and Sinbad. Riding ashore on a purpoise, he discovers an empty and unfallen land and is conducted by leopards to a high plateau where he sees the ruins of an ancient city. Sin and death invade the peaceful landscape where he, together with three savage women, consumes the flesh of a milk-white beast. He then becomes a witness to the violent war between dog-rats and monkeys, which turns into a bloodshed. As a result of this violent war, the earth and sea are filled with corpses. All these experiences represent the destructive side of humans, which has led to immense suffering throughout history. Charles then comes to assimilate humanity's collective trauma. Such narratives, as Caruth (1996) points out, demonstrate the fact that what comes back to haunt the victim is not merely the violent event itself, but also the lingering fact that its whole meaning and impact have never been completely grasped or acknowledged (p. 6). In this sense, Watkins's visionary journey can be read as the mind's attempt to stage and restage an unassimilated trauma through mythic imagery and symbolic violence. These repeated images of destruction and corruption that Charles experiences indicate a buried memory or trauma that resists complete understanding and keeps coming back. In that regard, Charles' broken memories and his identification with figures like Odysseus, Jonah, and Sinbad reveal the mind's attempt to convey a personal or collective traumatic event that cannot be directly expressed.

Caruth (1996) claims that trauma should not be understood merely as a consequence of destruction but as "an enigma of survival." Only by acknowledging trauma as a paradoxical correlation between "destructiveness and survival" can we begin to grasp the persistent incomprehensible phenomenon that lies at the core of catastrophic experience (p. 58). In this light, Watkins's ascent and entrance into the Crystal Disc represent not an escape from trauma but a transformation through it towards a sense of unity and wholeness. Even before becoming amnesiac, Charles had begun questioning the accepted teachings of history, archaeology, art, and myth that he had been professionally familiar with. He had doubts about the ideas he taught at university, sensing that the academic classical teachings he taught served to hide a more profound, forgotten truth. As one of his friends recalls, Charles claimed that "everything taught under the heading of Classics is pigsfeed from beginning to end, and never has been anything else" (p.190). The overall point of this scepticism, Lessing suggests, is for us to recall and perpetuate the idea of harmony, unity, and wholeness by moving beyond the limits of Western rational thought. This parallels the way trauma is experienced, survived, and reshaped over time.

Caruth (1996) observes that trauma can be understood as a phenomenon of being overtaken by a past that does not wholly belong to the individual but instead moves beyond personal experience and knowledge. This concept of trauma demonstrates that "it is not possible for the witnessing of the trauma to occur within the individual at all, that it may only be in future generations that 'cure' or at least witnessing can take place" (p.136). Caruth's notion of trauma as an experience that exceeds individual boundaries parallels Watkins' recollections of the war: "When this war was over, we all knew […] this land that was so rich and beautiful would flower into a loving harmony

that was as much a memory as a dream for the future. It was as if every one of us had lived so, once upon a time, at another time, in a country like this […] We were all bound in together by another time, another air" (p. 212). The letters which frame Watkins' account prove that he had not been in Yugoslavia and that Miles Bovey, his brother-in-law, who had been there, did not die in the war. Therefore, Watkins' account of his wartime experiences in Yugoslavia ''violates fact but validates the truth of the heart'' (Bolling, 1973, p. 563). In Watkins' idealized recollection of the war, we find Caruth's concept of trauma, which exceeds personal boundaries and might be witnessed and cured by future generations. Watkins' war narratives might not be based on factual events, but they serve to recover a forgotten sense of unity and harmony from the violence that takes place during the war. During the war, the soldiers lack a proper uniform, yet the Red Star binds them together. This group of soldiers that were composed of Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Catholics, and Muslims find in the Red Star a common ground where divisions based on nationalities or faith are eradicated and instead harmony, unity and wholeness prevail just like "when the poor and meek and the humble had inherited the Earth, and the lion would lie down with the lamb" (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, 2002, p. 213). This Partisan saga that Watkins narrates, therefore, ''traces a kind of borderline between history and fantasy. Watkins' war story appears to have an 'objective' basis, to be a legitimate recovery of past events'' (Marder, 2002, p. 446). Through this narrative, Watkins transforms the historical trauma of war into a collective memory and a form of survival. This, in Caruth's terms, reflects trauma's delayed return in symbolic form, in which survival itself becomes a way of remembering.

The fact that Watkins himself did not personally join the war in Yugoslavia but remembers the traumatic events from the war that he has not experienced firsthand reminds us of Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" which "characterizes of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (1997, p. 22). Watkins recalls memories that he has not personally experienced, but they feel intensely real to him. Those memories appear to be inherited or transmitted experiences, which shows that traumatic events can transcend personal boundaries and even generations. Hirsch's concept of postmemory reveals how trauma can be internalized through historical representations and narratives rather than through personal experiences. Such traumatic memories do not resurface as lucid but as fragmented recollections that profoundly influence our lives and identities, as we clearly see in Charles' case, where his postmemories blur the line between individual and collective experience. This clearly reveals how traumatic events move beyond personal experiences and live on across generations.

Charles' narratives in the novel are thus shaped by collective images, myths, and historical violence rather than by individual experience alone. That is why his identification with mythic figures and his cosmic travels intertwine his personal breakdown and collective human suffering. This interconnected idea of memory and identity deconstructs the Western notion of the self as an autonomous, isolated entity. The memories he recalls and the cosmic visions he experiences thus bind Charles to an ancestral or universal origin that transcends spatial and temporal boundaries. Those memories reveal that recovery starts to come to fruition if one realizes that he is a significant, albeit small, part of a larger, interconnected whole rather than an isolated, autonomous self: "When this war was over, we all knew […] this land that was so rich and beautiful would flower into a loving harmony that was as much a memory as a dream for the future. It was as if every one of us had lived so, once upon a time, at another time, in a country like this […] We were all bound in together by another time, another air (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, 2002, p. 212). However, this movement toward healing depends on being heard and recognized by others, by witnesses. For that reason, throughout the novel, Charles's interconnected vision keeps oscillating between a deeper awareness and isolation because of not being listened to or heard.

According to Felman and Laub (1992), trauma can neither be fully experienced nor understood without a witness who can listen and respond and thus trauma remains unresolved and keeps coming back if it is spoken but not truly heard or listened to: "[T]he telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma – *a re-experiencing of the event itself*" (emp. original, p. 67). In this sense, trauma is not only about what happened, but it is also about the failure of communication between the traumatized subject and the witnesses. In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Charles Watkins lacks such a witness in the hospital. Even though he narrates his experiences in detail, he is not truly heard; instead, his testimony is merely recorded, classified, and interpreted. When we examine Charles' testimony, we notice it is rife with contradictions and gaps. This reminds us of Felman and Laub's description of a traumatic event that is real but does not unfold in a way the mind can easily comprehend. The traumatic event thus has no clear beginning or end, so it cannot be fully remembered, explained, or overcome. That is why, the survivors of traumatic events do not experience it as something from the past, but rather as something that keeps happening in the present: "Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect" (1992, p. 69). However, in the novel, Doctors X, Y, and Z, as representatives of impersonal and institutional psychiatry, reduce Charles' narratives to a process of classification, recording, and diagnosis. Therefore, they are unable to witness the traumatic events Charles recounts. Thus Charles, as a traumatized subject, remains unheard: "The testimony to the trauma thus includes its

hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (Felman and Laub, 1992, p. 57).

Throughout the novel, Charles Watkins' experience appears to be in the process of what Dominick LaCapra (2001) calls "acting out and working through trauma" (p. 23), rather than a linear process from amnesia to recovery. At the beginning of the novel, Charles perpetually acts out trauma with his visions that transcend spatial and temporal boundaries. Charles' visions, in this sense, epitomize what LaCapra describes as the reliving of the past as if it were still present: "[I]n post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one can remember what happened to one in the past but realizes one is living in the here and now with future possibilities" (2001, pp. 46-47). As Charles is caught in these visions, he cannot separate past events from the present. Thus he experiences trauma as an event that keeps happening in the present time rather than as an event that occurred in the past with a clear resolution. In the novel, we see the process of working through trauma, especially in the Crystal Disc section. When Charles eventually succeeds in getting inside the Crystal Disc on the third descent of the Disc, he can grasp a different form of reality. Before getting into the Crystal, he perceives the world as an individual, but in the Crystal, he goes through an inner journey:

> Everywhere and on every level, the little individuals made up wholes, struck little notes, made tones of color. On every level, even myself and my friends whom the Crystal had absorbed into a whole, unimportant gnats, and my women and my children and everyone I had known in my life – even someone passed on a Street corner and smiled at once – these struck a note, made a whole. Moreover, this was the truth that gave the utter insignificance of these notes their significance; in the great singing dance, everything linked and moved together. (p. 96)

In the Crystal Disc, Charles no longer sees himself as a separate, isolated individual. However, as part of a larger, interconnected realm in which everything becomes an indispensable part of the whole, and enables him to view life through dependency and connection rather than isolation. This moment reflects what LaCapra (2001) describes as trauma's dissociation when "one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel" (p. 42). In that sense, working through trauma does not necessarily mean to eradicate it but rather to be able to view it as something whose effects are felt in the present even though it took place in the past. For Charles to achieve a renewed sense of unity and wholeness through his reconstructed identity, the Crystal Disc serves as a significant symbol that, as Bolling (1973) observes, operates on multiple levels. It evokes a higher vision of universal beauty and harmony, as well as reflecting the narrator's inner desire for wholeness and balance. Through images of light and the sun, it brings cosmic meaning and inner healing together, illustrating his search for illumination not just in the world but also within himself (p. 556). Charles' visionary experiences in the Disc might therefore be interpreted as a metaphor for memory's healing process after the traumatic event. The Disc allows Charles to move beyond his individual process of healing and coalesce into collective memory and cosmic consciousness, which subsequently leads to spiritual illumination and psychic wholeness. Inside the Disc, he is absorbed into and becomes one with that which he simultaneously sees outside of his mind: "[W]e made a whole in such a way that it was not possible to say, Here Charles begins, here John or Miles or Felicity or Constance ends. And so with us all. […] It was the mind of humanity that I saw, but this was not at all to be separated from the animal mind, which married and fused with it everywhere" (pp. 91-92). This higher awareness of merging and becoming one with everything that exists is the central point of the novel, and it is what Charles is supposed to keep in mind when he descends from the Crystal Disc into hell, that is ''our fragmented earthly consciousness'' (Hynes, 1994, p. 229).

After the descent from the Disc, Charles is required to remember and spread the word that everything is interconnected and in harmony with each other, such as "dream and life, light-sound and experience, perceiver and perception, thinker and thought, subject and object, you and I, one and many'' (Hynes, 1994, p. 231). From his elevated perspective within the Crystal Disc, Charles comes to perceive humans as a kind of microbe, small and apparently insignificant. However, they constitute a significant part of a vast, interconnected whole. Unlike the Western logocentric emphasis on rationality, language, and individualism, Doris Lessing, through Charles' cosmic and maritime experiences, offers a synthesis of the physical world and the transcendental realm. That is why, through his experiences in the Crystal Disc, Charles transcends the dominant Western rational order and descends into madness and forgetting, which turn out to be acts of healing. This process mirrors what LaCapra (2001) describes as "post-traumatic acting out, in which one is haunted or possessed by the past" and trapped in "the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes" where "tenses implode" and the past is endlessly relived (p. 21). Charles's visionary journey, in that regard, reveals how trauma has taken hold of him and ensnared him in a cycle of repetition. His experience, however, shows the possibility of the healing process towards an interconnected sense of self and existence rather than a logocentric, individualistic worldview.

Charles Watkins's being amnesiac leads to a loss of memory and identity. Nevertheless, from the lens of the trauma theory, his "visions may be the dissociative imaginings of a traumatized patient, a statement of denial of the

surrounding world" (Kamińska, 2016, p. 88). His amnesia is thus not just forgetfulness but rather a withdrawal from a world where he has been traumatized. As Herman (1997) explains, traumatic experience often resists narration, since "traumatic memory […] is wordless and static," and the survivor's first attempts to speak about it may be "repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless" (p. 175). This state is reflected in Charles's fragmented visions and disjointed speech, which is a clear indication of how both memory and language are disrupted throughout the traumatic process. For Herman, some steps are required for the healing process to begin, such as establishing safety, initiating the remembrance phase, and eventually achieving reconnection. According to Herman, recovery from trauma depends on trust: "[T]he paradox and challenge of psychotherapy with trauma survivors is that it requires a trusting relationship as its foundation, yet with people whose trust has been profoundly violated, building trust must be a goal rather than a precondition of treatment" (1997, p. 267). However, in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, the doctors at the psychiatric hospital fail to build this trust, which prevents them from fostering a genuine reconnection. Thus, they force Charles back into a socially defined identity. As a result of their treatment, Charles' memory is restored, but healing from trauma remains unresolved.

As a consequence of this failure of human and institutional witnessing, Charles is prompted to discover meaning and interconnectedness beyond the limits of the dominant Western linear understanding. Within this context, Charles comes to view time not as a linear sequence but as a continuous, unified whole. He rejects the divisions between past, present, and future, and claims that the workings of the mind and the flow of time are inseparable: "[E]ach one of us," he says, "is at least two scales of time wrapped together like the yolk and white of an egg" (p. 58). Within this higher realm of awareness, Charles recognizes that temporal divisions dissolve, and, as a result, past, present, and future coexist. Such coexistence of different tenses mirrors how traumatic memory repeatedly resurfaces in the present without a clear-cut resolution, a condition as Hirsch (1997) notes, describes "a past that will neither fade away nor be integrated into the present" (p. 40).

The Planetary Conference in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* exemplifies such dissolution of temporal and spatial boundaries. During this conference, where entities from various planets gather to discuss the survival and future of the universe, we witness a shared cosmic present in which memories and histories coexist. In this conference, Charles refers to the Sun, which is a symbol of the transcendental center. As a Classics professor, Charles reinterprets his scholarly knowledge through a visionary lens. He is guided by Mercury and told to remember the more profound truth that was revealed to him in the Crystal Disc. The gathering of celestial beings proceeds with a briefing led by Merk Ury and Minna Erve, who present a prophetic vision of cosmic catastrophe and human mutation. These souls, echoing Plato's *Republic*, as Samuelson (1979) points out, cannot truly "be briefed for their descent to Earth" since they will forget all they have learned upon entering human consciousness (p. 3). In his address, Charles emphasizes that interconnectedness matters rather than an isolated, individualistic self. Thus, he draws attention to the fact that alienation and violence are perpetuated as a result of arbitrary divisions among human beings based on belief, race, and geography:

> […] it is not at all a question of descending into the poisonous hell and remaining unaffected. Every one of us takes their life in their hands. For these creatures are for the most part, malevolent, and murderous by nature, able to tolerate others only in so far as they resemble themselves, capable of slaughtering each other because of a slight difference in skin color or appearance. Also, they cannot tolerate those who do not think as they do […] although they know that it is entirely by chance that any individual among them was born into this or that area, this or that area of belief, this theoretical knowledge does not prevent them from hating foreigners in their own particular small area. (p. 122)

Communication in this visionary scene is not built on ordinary language but on mutual understanding and recognition. Unlike the hospital, where Charles is not heard or listened to, the Conference turns out to be a realm that transcends the limits of individual and national boundaries. Thus, it emerges as an alternative space to failed human institutions. The amnesia Charles has been experiencing thus mirrors a collective traumatic event that humanity must face to avoid arbitrary ruptures and perceive a more profound truth. As Fishburn (1998) observes, Charles continually "violates reality," not through madness but by negating "the voices of reason and everyday reality in the novel'' (p. 55). The Planetary Conference, therefore, represents a sort of collective witnessing that transcends the human realm. Self and identity here are reconstructed as extensions of a larger whole rather than in solitary, alienated individualism. Trauma, in this context, reveals a more profound metaphysical truth built on shared responsibility and interconnectedness, which Western dominant discourses based on reason and individualism have long suppressed. This deeper awareness and truth are what Lessing envisions to confront collective trauma and initiate healing.

3. CONCLUSION

Charles Watkins' experiences that extend beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* can be interpreted as an inner journey that encapsulates collective trauma. His madness, amnesia, and visionary experiences thus take shape not as manifestations of a psychological breakdown but rather as the mind's efforts to liberate the self from the constraints of the Western rationality that has imprisoned it. Doris Lessing reveals an alternative reality in which unity, harmony, and wholeness are emphasized through the visionary experiences of Charles Watkins, who enters an alternative state of reality in an attempt to get rid of "the loss (perhaps irreversible) of psychic wholeness by modern-day Western man" (Bolling, 1973, p. 551). Watkins's amnesia, in this sense, turns out to be a metaphor for the traumatic rupture of modern consciousness rather than simply being a form of madness or psychic illness. Through the lens of trauma theories, this article unravels that Lessing in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* emphasizes that consciousness cannot be reduced to autonomous self, stable identity, or rationality. Instead, by moving beyond the Western dualist perspective, she invites us to confront our collective trauma(s) emanated from our cultural and historical atrocities and reconstruct an alternative world built on interconnectedness, coherence, and mutual understanding and responsibility. Lessing thus turns trauma into a metaphysical and spiritual awakening towards a collective, cosmic past that modern man has forgotten: "Man must leave Eden in order to grow - but he may spend the rest of his life trying to return to it. The nostalgia for wholeness is his oldest memory, for unity is located, symbolically, at both the beginning and the end of consciousness" (Rubenstein, 2003, p.227). Lessing therefore reminds us that the process of healing from both personal and collective traumatic event(s) initiates when we begin to comprehend the significance of a more profound truth that is based on interconnectedness, unity, and wholeness, and build our existence accordingly.

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