



The Road Less Travelled: *Mara and Dann* as a Heroine's Quest Narrative

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Abstract:

This paper proposes to re-read Doris Lessing's 1999 novel Mara and Dann: An Adventure from as a successful quest narrative that involves a heroine's journey. It makes use of Auden's famous essay "The Quest Hero" written on Tolkien's fantasy novel The Lord of the Rings to discuss how the novel successfully fits the genre of the Quest narrative and that the faults in the novel pointed out by critics are due to the limitations of the genre itself. It uses the model of a heroine's quest as discussed by Maureen Murdock in her book The Heroine's Journey: Women's Quest for Wholeness and shows how the novel follows the pattern of the journey described by Murdock closely and how it is similar and, at the same time, different from the traditional quest narrative of a hero.

Key words: Quest narrative, heroine, feminine, journey, female experience, Doris Lessing.

Doris Lessing published *Mara and Dann* in 1999 with the sub-title "An Adventure". The novel, however, seems to have received very little critical attention and has more often than not been dubbed as a "failure as science fiction, either because of its 'iffy technology', or the ' clichéd' message about twentieth-century industrialised culture's reliance on technology and indifference to the environment and global

warming” (Watkins 2010, 124). Reviews of the book have varied with Maggie Gee praising it in *The Guardian* as “utterly strange, detailed and absorbing as along, bright dream”, while Michael Upchurch in “Back to Ifrik” published in *The New York Times* notices that “the book has the shape of a myth or a folktale”, but that it fails because “it feels inflated, repetitious and strangely devoid of surprise”. The reviews, however, do not take into account the fact that the novel can be read as a successful quest narrative. This paper examines *Mara and Dann* as a quest narrative which describes the journey of its heroine Mara and attempts to show how *Mara and Dann* not only consists of all characteristics of a quest narrative, but also follows the patterns discussed by Maureen Murdock in her book *The Heroine's Journey: Women's Quest for Wholeness*.

The quest narrative is perhaps one of the oldest literary genres. The story of a quest narrative typically comprises of a hero or, in fewer cases like here, a heroine who is set out in the world to make a long, tedious journey overcoming difficult challenges to reach a final destination that seems to offer the promise of “happily ever after”. In *Mara and Dann*, the journey they undertake is primarily to win a battle for survival. In order to look for water and better living conditions they must keep moving “North” all the time, even though they don't know what the eventual “North” will be like and have no idea of when they will have to stop. But this novel is also a quest for their identities which they are forced to give up as small children in order to survive the coup d'état that uproots their Mahondi clan and their journey for survival begins right from the moment they give up their identities and travel to a safer place so that their lives can be saved.

In his analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* as a quest narrative, Auden gives certain characteristics of a quest narrative that fit the case of *Mara and Dann* comfortably. Auden describes two plausible settings of quest narratives. Quests can be set in a dreamland which gives them the

advantage of not having to follow the laws that apply to our world and quest tales can be “set in places we can find in atlas and in times we can read of in history books” (Auden 2004, 40). *Mara and Dann* occupies a unique place in this regard as the setting of the story is a mixture of the two. It speaks of places like Ifrik (Africa) and Yerrup (Europe) that can very well be traced on maps and atlas, and yet not in the form that the novel speaks of. The time the novel is set in can also be considered a mixture of fact and fantasy, for though it is set in the distant future which is built mostly on imagination, the references to the ice-ages is based on facts and the long dry spell and dryness that is presented in the text have an edge of prophecy as well as scientific warning’s about weather change to them. What Auden says for Tolkien’s setting then also holds true for Lessing’s setting of the novel, it is set “neither in a dream world, nor in the actual world but in an imaginary world” (Auden 2004, 40). He goes on to describe certain requirements that go into the making of a convincing land of imagination:

Its laws may be different from those which govern our own [world], but they must be as intelligible and inviolable. Its history maybe unusual, but it must not contradict our notion of what history is, an interplay of Fate, Choice and Chance. . . . The triumph of good over evil must be shown as we know them to be, morally neutral and effectively real (Auden 2004, 41).

This applies to the imaginary setting of *Mara and Dann* too. The history of the places they go through in the course of their journey are sure unusual – be it the Rock Village with its dryness, their stay at Chelops or the various rivers and cities they pass through in their journey up north – but they do not defy the sense of history for their histories too are plagued by racial antagonisms, slavery, addiction to drugs, weakening rulers and the lust for money. What Auden means by the “effectively real” triumph of good over evil is that the victory of goodness over evil should be convincing to the readers, for

“battles are won by the stronger side” (Auden 2004, 41). In *Mara and Dann*, evil is personified in the ever looming presence of Kulik, who has haunted the brother and sister duo ever since they entered the Rock Village. Dann’s hatred of Kulik is clear right since childhood as he swears that someday he will kill Kulik and Mara too is afraid of Kulik who always seems to be looking for ways to harm her and Dann through the novel. The victory of Mara and Dann over Kulik comes towards the very end of the novel, by which time Mara and Dann have grown stronger, have means to escape and have friends who help them, while Kulik has grown old and alone. But even then they can never be sure if they have actually been able to get rid of him or is he going to return to haunt them. However, by the time the novel ends the sister and brother have some reasons to believe that Kulik might be dead and that they can now live a life free from the terror that has followed them since childhood. The novel can be criticised for its use of multiple characters, none of which is developed in detail and whose presence leaves only a shadowy mark on the reader, most of the characters like Daima, the entire Mahondi clan at Chelops, the different people Mara and Dann encounter on their way are examples of this kind of character portrayals. However, since it is a quest narrative, it deals with and emphasises on capturing the essence of the journey and its impact only on the protagonist. Hence, it leaves little scope for the development of different characters the duo meets in their long journey.

The setting of the novel corresponds well enough to that of a quest narrative. But the fact is that this is a quest by and of Mara, a heroine and not a traditional hero. Though her brother Dann also accompanies her throughout her journey when they start together from the Rock Village, he is more of a shadowy presence, a companion to the heroine who at the same time, both rescues her from difficult situations as well as lands her in difficult times. Dann could be defined as what is in the traditional quest story the “Other”. The “Other” can also be

called the alter-ego of the hero, in this case Mara, can be the hero's sibling or best friend and he often represents all that a hero is not. In other words, the dark side of the hero confronts him in the form of the double, the "other". In *Mara and Dann*, Dann can be described as the alter-ego of the heroine Mara. Not only are they both closely related being siblings, but Dann also represents the weaknesses of addiction to opium and gambling which frighten Mara a good deal because she fears Dann might put their life in danger due to these addictions, a case which almost happens when Dann gambles away Mara and it is sheer luck that saves both the brother and the sister from the misfortune that could have befallen them. In a traditional quest narrative, though the protagonist may try to break this bond, s/he is not able to, because the two characters cannot exist without each other. In the case of *Mara and Dann*, it is interesting to see that the heroine's reaction to her alter-ego is different, Mara does not try to run away from Dann though she knows that he has his weaknesses that land them both in trouble again and again. It is clear that as the journey progresses and the brother-sister go through various adventures, their bond grows stronger and nothing can induce them to separate.

So far, it has been demonstrated that the novel successfully follows the structure of a quest narrative. The novel, however, is also significantly different from the traditional quest undertaken by a hero because it is, primarily, a heroine's quest, Mara's quest. It is interesting to look at the novel from this new perspective considering it to be a heroine's journey. In this regard, the novel, to a great extent, follows the pattern of the quest as described by Maureen Murdock in her book *The Heroine's Journey*. *The Heroine's Journey* was written as an answer to Joseph Campbell's model of the hero's journey that he offered in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Dissatisfied with Campbell's model, Murdock wrote her book because she felt that the model "failed to address the

specific psycho-spiritual journey of the contemporary women” (qtd in Rogers 2013). This model using cultural myths “illustrates an alternative journey model to that of patriarchal hegemony” (Rogers 2013).

The Heroine’s Journey, according to Murdock’s book, consists of the following stages:

- Separation from the feminine
- Identification with the masculine and gathering of allies
- Road of trials, meeting ogres and dragons
- Finding the boon of success
- Awakening to the feeling of spiritual aridity: Death
- Initiations and descent to the goddess
- Urgent yearning to connect with the feminine
- Healing the mother –daughter split
- Integration of masculine and feminine (Rogers 2013)

In *Mara and Dann*, Mara’s separation from the feminine comes in the form of the early separation of the children from the family that also includes separation from her mother. Though the children are then taken to live with Daima, an old Mahondi woman who tries to do her best for the children, and is closer to Mara than Dann as he runs away from the village as a child while she stays on, Daima can never replace the mother for Mara. Further, and more importantly, her separation from the feminine comes in the form of her inability to menstruate. She stops menstruating soon after she starts it because there is never enough to eat and hence there is no blood to maintain the flow. The stopping of the flow alienates Mara from her femininity, yet it is a blessing for her in her present circumstances for this prevents her from all the pregnancy related issues that she is sure she would otherwise have to face, especially with the ever looming sinister presence of Kulik around though she clearly

misses her feminine side. "Recently Mara had been thinking that if she did have a child – if the blood did come back – it would be something to love" (Lessing 1999, 39).

This separation from the feminine makes it easier for her to embrace masculinity and she can assume the identity of a boy, Maro, and identify herself as Dann's brother through a long part of the journey. Because she has under-developed breasts (again a separation from the feminine), she is able to tie a knot of gold coins to her bosom for safe keeping. Mara's (and Dann's) entire journey from the Rock Village till the time they reach their final destination at the end of the novel is a journey on a road full of ogres, monsters and dragons in the form of various people who are hungry and desperate and have the potential to kill the duo for a single piece of bread. Besides is the shadow of Kulik that never seems to leave them all the time they are on road and even when they take shelter at Chelops the presence of Kulik haunts them. The stay at Chelops with people of their own i.e. Mahondis comes as a respite for Mara who regains her feminity there when her deception of being a male is seen through and she is brought into the quarters of the women. Her stay at Chelops corresponds to the stage of the boon of success in Murdock's journey because here she reconnects to her old self, she is able to get the boon of love in the form of Meryx who she stays with and the knowledge regarding the world around that she gains while she and Dann live at Chelops.

However, her journey does not end in Chelops and she can see that Chelops too is on the way to its gradual destruction due to the worsening draught that can leave Chelops as dry as the rock village she comes from and due to the fear of revolution from the lower classes of workers who hate the Mahondis who virtually control the entire administration. The feeling of spiritual aridity and death that are the next step in Murdock's model of the journey take place in the novel when during the further course of her journey while crossing a river Mara

realises that she is carrying Meryx's child. She also knows that however she might want to keep the child she cannot do so because she has seen many children die of "draught-sickness" and lack of food on the travels and also because she knows that if anybody knows she is pregnant she might be held hostage for "breeding programme" at the river towns, which very nearly happens. As a result, Mara knows that she has no other option but to abort the baby and does so with the help of the prison wardens who are also women of herbs and medicines. This abortion is the stage of death and aridity for the pang of having lost a baby troubles Mara longer than she wants.

The rest of Mara's journey also significantly differs from the model of the hero's journey. Mara's journey is further complicated when she along with Dann is captured at Charad. General Shabis, one of the four generals of the place makes Dann one of the members of the army while Mara gets an opportunity to learn as much as she can. Mara's troubles however only worsen when she is kidnapped by Charad's enemies and it is almost one year before she can finally join Dann. Dann, who is Mara's alter-ego as discussed before in the paper, proves to be a cause of Mara's trouble when he gambles Mara and she is captured in Dalide's house, which is a house for prostitution. Mara however is very concerned for Dann even though she is angry at him for having been weak enough to gamble her away. This differentiates this from an ordinary quest narrative because in a hero's journey, the hero tries to keep away and be rid of his "other" who represents the weakness inherent in him.

When Mara (with Dann) reaches "the Centre", the place she has always dreamed of getting to, the search not only of "up north", the place with water comes to an end, but their true identities are also revealed with the discovery that Mara and Dann are princess Shahana and prince Shahmand. The quest, however, does not end at the discovery of their true names because though Dann is enchanted by the picture of life Felissa

and Felix, the caretakers at “the Centre”, paint for them as the king and queen of “the Centre”, Mara realises that this is not who she truly is and that it would not be possible for her to marry Dann as Felix and Felissa hope them to do. The integration of the masculine and the feminine can be seen in Mara and Dann’s realisation that they might be perfect for each other but this is not be possible, and the decision that it would be better for Mara to marry Shebis and, if possible, for Dann to marry Kira. Mara’s journey does not end on a note of “happily ever after” even though she is finally united with Shebis and her brother Dann is near her too. There looms a spectral presence of Kulik even after his death for they are never sure if they have actually been able to kill Kulik since they never get to see the dead body. The continuous strain in the relationship of Dann and Shabis till the novel’s end also defies any immediate hope of happily ever after. In fact, the novel, unlike a traditional quest, ends on a more realistic note when Mara affirms to a question put up by Dann that though they have now reached a place of security, the memories of the hardships suffered in the past still haunt her and will not be so easily forgotten:

Dann ignored him, looked straight at his sister, and said, ‘Mara, tell me honestly . . . when you wake up in the morning, isn’t it the first thing you think of –how far you’re going to go today. . . . And the two of us together? Even if the thing you think after is Shabis? (Lessing 1999, 270).

Mara and Dann successfully fits the form of a quest narrative, and yet it differs from the traditional quest because it is not the quest of a hero, but the journey of a heroine. It has considerable variations from the stages in a hero’s journey, creating a different form of narration and story that fit the female experience.

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