

Mental Patterns in Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*: A Reading in the light of Jung's Analytical Psychology

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Abstract:

Jung's analytical psychology is an esoteric school of thought that has challenged many postulates in the field of psychology. Delving deep in the hidden dimensions of our psychoid processes, Jung's analytical model discusses highly controversial issues related to our epistemological outlook and ontological being. It studies how man's being is shaped by the forces of the unconscious level, and by the symbols, archetypes, and archetypal ideas that lurk in the two layers of the unconscious – the personal and the collective unconscious. The present study aims to offer a reading of Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* in the light of Jung's analytical model. Through an analytic and a psychological reading of the text that makes use of the Jungian concept of the archetype, the collective unconscious, and the process of individuation, the study seeks to recontextualize the mechanisms through which identity is shaped, and to explore how psychological suffering and the boundaries of the self affect our process of identification. It also attempts to point out how levels of conflict can cause man's psychological disintegration, and to stress the fact that the psychic is nothing but the mental patterns that are in function inside the human mind. The psychological reading of the text refers, moreover, to the essentiality of having a multi-dimensional

psychological profiling if a therapist is to provide a real treatment for the patient. The study finally stresses that it is not one universal approach that is to be applied to different psychological cases, but rather a multiplicity of various psychological approaches that can accommodate different epistemological and ontological orientations that are inseparable from the individual's mental and psychological outlook.

Keywords: Symbol - Archetype - Individuation - Counselling - Conflict – The Wounded Healer Archetype – The Collective Unconscious.

الأنماط الذهنية في رواية "تجربة السقوط في الجحيم"
لدوريس لسنج: قراءة في ضوء علم النفس التحليلي ليونج

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ملخص البحث:

إن مدرسة يونج في علم النفس التحليلي هي اتجاه فكري ذو طبيعة خاصة، فهو اتجاه يضع الكثير من علامات الاستفهام على كثير من المسلمات في مجال علم النفس. ويناقش علم النفس التحليلي عند يونج الكثير من القضايا المتعلقة باتجاهات الإنسان المعرفية والوجودية من خلال الخوض في الأبعاد الخفية للعمليات النفسية التي تجري في النفس البشرية. ويبحث علم النفس التحليلي ليونج في تأثير قوى اللاشعور على التكوين النفسي للإنسان وكيف تؤثر الرموز والأنماط والأفكار البدائية الموجودة في اللاشعور الفردي والجمعي على تحديد الأنماط الذهنية التي توجه الإنسان. وتهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تقديم قراءة لرواية "تجربة السقوط في الجحيم" لدوريس لسنج في ضوء نظرية يونج في علم النفس التحليلي من خلال قراءة تحليلية ونفسية للرواية تهدف إلى إعادة صياغة المفاهيم التي من خلالها يتم تناول مفهوم تشكيل الهوية، وذلك من خلال دراسة مفاهيم يونج عن الرموز والأنماط والأفكار البدائية وتأثير حالات الاضطراب النفسي والأنماط الذهنية على عملية تشكيل الهوية عند الأفراد. ويتطرق البحث أيضًا إلى مستويات الصراع النفسي والتي من شأنها أن تؤثر على السلامة النفسية للأفراد، مؤكداً على أن المخزون النفسي عند الأفراد ما هو إلا الأنماط الذهنية التي تتفاعل داخل عقولهم وتشكل تكوينهم النفسي. ويشير البحث أيضًا إلى أهمية أن يتعامل المعالج النفسي مع كل مريض نفسي على أنه كيان مستقل بذاته، وأن يبتعد عن الفرضيات المسبقة عند بدء عملية العلاج النفسي، وألا تقتصر عملية العلاج النفسي على اتجاه فكري واحد وطريقة علاج محددة، كما يشير البحث إلى حقيقة أن عملية العلاج النفسي يجب أن تبتعد عن التعميم، ويؤكد على أهمية أن تلجأ إلى مختلف التقنيات التي من شأنها استيعاب التوجهات المعرفية والثقافية والوجودية للمريض النفسي.

الكلمات الدالة: الرمز - النمط البدائي - عملية بناء الشخصية - الاستشارة النفسية - الصراع - نمط المعالج/ المريض - اللاوعي الجمعي.

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1. Introduction

Jung's analytical psychology is an esoteric school of thought that deals with the hidden dimensions of all our psychoid processes, and that delves deep into highly controversial issues related to our ontological as well as our epistemological being. An abstract theory that is difficult to make concrete enough, Jung's analytical psychology explores meanings, values, and the purpose of life and existence. Being an unusual modality of psychological therapy, Jung's psychological approach is thus difficult to integrate with other modalities.

Revolting against the Freudian definition of the collective unconscious, Jung's interactionist outlook has proposed a model of psychodynamic theory that encompasses a wide range of humanistic theories, esoteric propositions, metaphysical issues, and spiritual values. According to Heydt, Jung

was the first psychiatrist who took a real interest in the ramblings of severely disturbed patients and in their dreams and visions, attempting to make senses of them. He detected links between psychotic apparent non-sense and numinous material and constantly tried to discover from where it originated (11, in Ryce-Menuhin Ed.)

Jung's psychodynamic model is thus a revolutionary model that

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recontextualizes concepts that have for so long been taken for granted.

Jung's psychodynamic model is seen as "adopting a neo-Kantian empiricist philosophical position" (Gaist 81). Enlarging the Kantian rationalist orientation that stresses the ability of the human mind to concretize transcendental issues and have them verbalized and communicated, Jung proposes a model of psychological theory that does not fear misoneism and that integrates within its framework cultural and religious elements that have for so long been dismissed as trivial and unimportant. Jung's interpretation of dreams and their content, his reflection on the meanings of symbols and archetypes, and his revolutionary definition of the concept of free association represent a major turning point in the field of psychology considered by Jung as "one of the youngest of the sciences, [that] attempts to deal with working of the unconscious, [and that] has inevitably encountered misoneism in an extreme form" (17).

Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* is an embodiment of the Jungian reflections on the psychoid processes of psychologically disturbed people, and a deep reflection on issues of ontological uncertainty and epistemological skepticism. Categorized as *inner-space fiction*, Lessing creates in the text a juxtaposition between the physical reality and the spatio-temporal dimension of our inner space. Illustrating in the title that "there in never anywhere to go but in", Lessing creates a mosaic that offers its readership an encounter with the deepest layers of our unconscious level and a tracing of how the workings of the collective unconscious have a very strong impact on our psychological, cultural, and epistemological outlook towards life and reality.

The present study seeks to offer an analytical and a psychological reading of Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* in the light of Jung's analytical psychology. It also seeks to trace the mental patterns of the human mind, through the

character of Charles Watkins, and to illustrate how these mental patterns have a strong impact on the mental, psychological, and intellectual stance of man. Applying the Jungian concepts to the text, the present study aims to point out how the text investigates the nature of dreams, reality, and consciousness. Through an analytical and a psychological reading that makes use of the Jungian concepts of the archetype, the collective unconscious, and the process of individuation, the study aims to recontextualize the mechanisms through which identity is shaped by psychological experiences and by the boundaries of the self. Making use of the Jungian concept of free association, the study explores the nature of reality and the effects of trauma on man and how trauma can destroy and mutilate our perception of the world. The study, moreover, deals with the Jungian concept of conflict and how it can impede the process of attaining a healthy personality. The study, finally, deals with the theory of counselling, through the journey undertaken by Watkins, and with how psychological therapies need to enlarge their scope in order to be able to offer well-organized psychological profiles for different patients who come from heterogeneous cultural, intellectual, and educational backgrounds.

2. Jung's Analytical Psychology

Jung's analytical therapy is an unconventional model of psychological therapy that embraces propositions with no preconceived notions and that accommodates elements that have for so long been dismissed as trivial and irrelevant. According to Franz, "Jung's idea do not form a 'doctrine' but are the beginning of a new outlook... Jung... was always searching, with unusual freedom from conventional prejudices, and at the same time with great modesty and accuracy, to understand the phenomenon of life" (386, in Jung). Revolting against Freud's definition of the collective unconscious, Jung refuses the arbitrary relation, drawn by Freud, between the unconscious level and our instincts. He thus presents a model that enlarges the scope of our psychological and mental processes to accommodate elements that have been marginalized or ignored by many therapists. According to Jung,

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The collective unconscious is a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence to personal experience and consequently is not a personal acquisition... Whereas the personal unconscious consists for the most part of complexes, the content of the collective unconscious is made essentially of archetypes (56, in Adler and Hull Eds.)

This impersonal or collective unconscious, for Jung, is that inner reality and concepts that are shared, and not necessarily inherited, between people. It is the repository which contains our expected reactions to universal human situations.

The collective unconscious is that repository that contains symbols and archetypes that exercise their power in shaping man's psychological and intellectual attitude. Within the framework of Jung's analytical psychology, symbols and archetypes are important sources of knowledge about our psychic processes. For Jung, "the sign is always less than the concept it represents, while a symbol always stands for something more than its obvious and immediate meaning" (41), and "what we call a symbol is a name, or ever a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning" (9). Symbols, thus, are produced and received by man, and in each process of reception meaning and connotations are assimilated and contextualized. This process of contextualizing brings about another mental process of forming archetype. For Jung, "the archetype is a

tendency to form such representations of a motif-representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern” (58). The archetype is thus the thought that is assimilated by our unconscious level, releasing different feelings, ideas, and connotations. It is this “active primal thought or motivation which acts through our unconscious, most strongly through dreams” (Edwards 1).

Symbols and archetypes are assimilated consciously and unconsciously, and they find their way into our dreams. The general function of dreams is “to try to restore our psychological balance by producing dream material that re-establishes, in a subtle way, the total psychic equilibrium” (Jung 34). And through dreams, symbols and archetypes interact together in a mental process of free association. Jung’s revolutionary outlook, that has marked his complete break with Freudian psychoanalysis, is that this process of free association does not have to be initiated through dreams. According to Jung, “it was not necessary to use a dream as the point of departure for the process of ‘free association’ if one wished to discover the complexes of a patient” (11). For him, the interaction between symbols and archetypes, on the one hand, and between symbols, archetypes, and environmental stimuli, on the other, can also be initiated outside dreams, and can be traced through people’s speech, their figurative language, and their slips of the tongue.

3. Human Nature and the Theory of Healthy Personality in Lessing’s *Briefing*

Lessing’s *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* is an encounter with the darkest side of human nature, and a tracing of the long and tiresome journey undertaken by Charles Watkins to attain a healthy personality. Watkins’ psychological deterioration is the result of his direct confrontation with the atrocities of our civilization, and the irrational and bloody side of man’s existence. According to Jung, “human activity is influenced to a high degree by instincts, quite apart from the rational motivations of the conscious mind” (58, in Adler and Hull Eds.). Watkins, a

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professor of classics, suffers, mentally and psychologically, from the amount of violence and aggression he is exposed to, either through his academic studies or his personal experience. Watkins says, "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" (Lessing 92). Watkins' psychological deterioration is thus an epitome of man's defeat to lead a humane and civilized life.

Watkins' *descent into hell* and his psychological disintegration are laden with the symbols and archetypes that represent the mental patterns of his psychoid processes. Watkins says, "and there were sudden scuffles much louder than usual, and cries and shrieks. These last sounded like the blood-crazed women around their fire in the forest, and in the morning, after a long dark stuffy night, I walked into the city and saw corpses lying on the central square and also here and there among the houses" (Lessing 77). The reality created by Watkins' disturbed mind is one in which the symbols and archetypes connotative of decay, death, and the primitive form of life are prevailing. Traumatized by the atrocities he encounters or even reads about, Watkins fails to "defend consciousness against the fascinating, and yet dangerous, forces of the unconscious which are so powerful that they may cause the disintegration of the personality" (Schlamm 26, in Ryce-Menuhin Ed.).

Watkins' psychological disintegration is part of his painful journey to attain a healthy personality. According to Franz, "the actual processes of individuation – the conscious coming-to-terms with one's own inner center (psychic nucleus) or self – generally begins with a wounding of the personality and the suffering that accompanies it" (169, in Jung). Watkins' process of *individuation* is thus achieved through his direct inner confrontation with all the painful experiences that have brought about his psychological deterioration. His long disconnected speeches, and his rambling thoughts and mental patterns are inevitable steps towards achieving self-realization, and, ultimately, self-actualization.

Watkins thus is seen attempting to end the bloody violence and to erase the symbols and archetypes that remind him of death and decay. He says, "I poured water everywhere, and swept that away with sweet-smelling branches... [and then] the air smelled of aromatic leaves and water" (Lessing 86). In his attempt to come-to-terms with the bloody side of human existence in order to regain his psychological balance, Watkins resorts to other symbols and archetypes which are connotative of life, purification, and fertility.

Elusive and metaphoric as it is, language, and the spatio-temporal inner reality it creates, is part of the process of psychological healing and of the process of individuation. Commenting on the importance of understanding the psychic life-process of individuals through their linguistic content, Jung illustrates that, "it is important to realize that dreams and their symbolic images have a much more important role to play" (12). The process of individuation is thus carried out through language and through the linguistic connotations initiated by the symbols and archetypes in function in our linguistic input. Watkins' talk with the bizarre creatures he sees in his dreams is part of his process of individuation. He says, "for the sake of all the creatures that live on this poor sick earth, let us clear this place, let us sweep it with branches, and then bring water and wash away the stains of the filth that is here" (Lessing 77). Watkins' rambling discourse is crammed with symbols and archetypes that have transcended their linguistic framework and that have functioned as "structures and building blocks of the collective unconscious that is also called world unconscious or transpersonal" (Colombos 6). His disconnected speeches, however, assert themselves to be following an arrangement or a pattern – the pattern of the process of individuation that utilizes the symbols and the archetypes pertaining to humanity and to the *world unconscious*.

4. The Theory of Conflict in Lessing's *Briefing*

Conflict is a main theme that permeates Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. It is initiated through the metaphoric

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nature of language and the free play of the sign within our linguistic system of representation. Conflict creates in the text a deep sense of ontological uncertainty and a state of epistemological scepticism that are communicated to the reader through the character of Watkins and his journey from psychological deterioration to sanity. Notions and concepts are questioned and recontextualized, and this is done through the interplay of the symbols and the archetypes and their journey from Watkins' unconscious level to his conscious level and vice versa. Conflict is also initiated Watkins' revolt against herd morality and the state of alienation he suffers as a result.

Man's mental constructs are influenced by a linguistic system of representation in which signifiers refer to each other and in which signifieds are either elusive or absent. According to Jung, "each word means something slightly different to each person, even among those who share the same cultural background...and even the most carefully defined philosophical or mathematical concept... is nevertheless more than we assume" (28-29). As a professor of classics, Watkins is in close contact with language and with the techniques language utilizes to express reality. Watkins says, "You. You said we. I know that 'We'. It is the categorical collective. It would be so easy for you to do it" (Lessing 14). Watkins, in his rambling talk, alludes to Kant's categorical imperative in a mental process of free association that has brought the Kantian concept under the spotlight. Caught within the web of the linguistic system of representation, Watkins questions concepts and is indulged in an attempt to recontextualize them. He says, "and it mattered very much whether a concept 'nation' matched with the physical area beneath it" (Lessing 98). Watkins' talk, that totally departs from reality, is permeated every now and then with rational reflections and a deep questioning of the arbitrary relationship that exists between signifiers and signifieds.

Imprisoned within the linguistic system of representation and the boundaries it sets for communicating reality, Watkins

suffers a deep feeling of conflict, both ontologically and epistemologically. He says, “but we are wrong in dividing the mind’s machinery from time: they are the same. It is only in such sharp emphatic moments that we can recognize this fact” (Lessing 48). Watkins’ is seen suffering a deep sense of ontological uncertainty, linking man’s being to the passage of time and the incessant changes it yields. In spite of all the rationality that *seems* to govern modern man’s existence, “he is possessed by ‘powers’ that are beyond his control” (Jung 71) – powers that affect his ontological being and his place within the scheme of things.

Watkins’ ontological uncertainty is accompanied by a state of epistemological scepticism that has initiated doubts about how certain humanistic disciplines verbalize knowledge and communicate it. Watkins says, “it was as if the knowledge of what I would see caused me to see what otherwise I could not – for I already half believed that my seeing had created what I saw” (Lessing 49). Watkins’ state of epistemological scepticism concerning the role of sensory perception in communicating knowledge is paralleled with Frederick’s deep epistemological doubts concerning archaeology. Frederick says, “profound doubts about what was going on in Archaeology, doubts about its bases, premises, methods, and above all, its unconscious biases” (Lessing 168). Frederick, a specialist in archaeology, is shocked by the life of some tribes and how the moon, the river, and elements of nature can eradicate life totally. Suffering an intellectual shock, that dramatizes Watkins’ intellectual shock, Frederick questions how knowledge is formulated, verbalized, and communicated. He says, “there was no way of knowing an ancient society’s ideas except through the barrier of our own” (Lessing 164). Highlighting the difficulty encountered by the human mind in reaching ultimate truths in different branches of knowledge, Frederick verbalizes a deep reflective paradox in archaeology – that one has to talk about a wide range of ancient civilizations only through the epistemic boundaries of the present.

In addition to ontological uncertainty and epistemological scepticism, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* brings to the forefront

another layer of conflict - the one that is the result of revolting against the herd morality. According to Jung, "the man who has attained consciousness of the present is solitary... for every step towards fuller consciousness removes him further from his original, purely animal *participation mystique* with the herd" (457, in Campbell Ed.). This state of alienation – that is the direct result of revolting against the mainstream – initiates a process of internal conflict that can lead to psychological disintegration. The reader can detect the mental patterns concerning this revolt through Watkins' rambling speeches. Watkins says, "It's just a question of getting out of the North Equatorial Current into the South Equatorial Current, from clockwise to anti-clockwise. The wise anti-clocks" (Lessing 14). Watkins is thus seen fluctuating between Kant's categorical imperative, and the ideas of wholeness and conformity it propagates, and the wise act of going anti-clockwise, of revolting against the herd morality.

5. The Theory of Counselling in Lessing's *Briefing*

Within the framework of Jungian psychology, the process of psychological profiling is a multidimensional one. It depends on an interdisciplinary approach as its therapeutic method, and it acknowledges the difficulty psychology confronts and the fact that it has to deal with the irrational, the unconscious, and the supernatural through the tools set by our rationalist and logical thinking. According to Jung, "there is no therapeutic technique or doctrine that is of general application, since every case that one receives for treatment is an individual in a specific condition" (Jung 54). Universal rules and judgements are thus not welcomed in analytical psychology. Judgements are made to be discussed, reevaluated, and recontextualized. Jung illustrates that "because psychology basically depends upon balanced opposites, no judgement can be considered to be final in which reversibility has not been taken into account" (47).

In Lessing's *Briefing*, the reader is exposed to an embodiment of Jungian analytical therapy with its focus on the

minute details of Watkins' mental constructs and on the specificity of each psychological profile. The text reveals the *abyssal* experience of Watkins, and communicates to the reader, through Watkins' rambling talk, the essence of psychological suffering and mental deterioration. Watkins says, "it was a living in a different place or country, I knew all the time that I was living out another life... and it was a life so heavy and dismal and alien to me that to go to sleep was like entering a prison cell" (Lessing 61). Watkins' abyssal experience is unique and specific; one that should be dealt with away from universal judgements and predetermined assumptions. Through all the psychoid processes experienced by Watkins, "a new reality is born to us, offering us a new intrapsychic core, perhaps even restructuring the entire personality in a way the ego can better deal with its context and circumstances" (Leeming 5).

In Lessing's *Briefing*, the reader encounters the wounded healer archetype; the therapist who is able to offer a sound and deep communication with the patient. Gaist explains the idea of the wounded healer archetypes as follows:

Both psychotherapy and spiritual direction
may, when observed externally, appear
quite isolated professions...

The wounded healer archetype, however,
suggests this is far from the case, since
the wounding and suffering experienced and
held the psyche of the spiritual director
and the engaged psychotherapist, is potentially
a suffering-for-the-world. This pertains
both to the biography of the therapist as it
affects his relation to the client, and to
the difficulties narrated by the client,

inasmuch as they are seriously considered
by the therapist (269).

The wounded healer archetype is exemplified in the text through one of the doctors and one of the nurses who are able to interact with the spiritual and psychological dilemma of Watkins. The nurse says, "now do come on, dear. Oh dear, you are upset from time to time. I do myself. Think of it like that" (Lessing 34). In addition to monitoring the semantic symptoms of Watkins, the nurse is emotionally interacting with the psychic contents of the patient, triggering a process of free association to help Watkins come to terms with his sufferings and overcome them. Trying to help Watkins start a process of *individuation*, the nurse is seeking a union of the opposites – a healthy interaction between the conscious level and the unconscious one. The wounded healer, moreover, has to take into consideration how numinous forces can act as dangerous forces that cause the disintegration of consciousness. Watkins is reported to be having "religious delusions" (Lessing 137). The incidents of ontological uncertainty are thus highlighted by the therapist; bringing to the forefront the importance of paying attention to the epistemological and intellectual background of patients as well as their ontological and numinous concerns.

6. Conclusion

Jung's analytical psychology, as a revolutionary and multifaceted model of psychological therapy, has challenged many postulates that have for so long been taken for granted in the field of psychology. It has elucidated how man's being and identity are shaped by irreconcilable opposites – the conscious and the unconscious level – and by the indirect – yet influential – impact of symbols and archetypes on his being and identity. Within the framework of Jungian psychology, the unconscious level is the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious that are in a state of incessant reciprocal communication with the conscious level, resulting either in a sound process of

individuation or in psychological and mental disintegration. At play in this communication between the conscious and the unconscious level are the symbols and the archetypes that permeate the psychological processes of free association in man's mind. These symbols and archetypes, according to Jung, can direct one's thoughts and attitudes, and influence man's process of identification and his relation to his surroundings.

A reading of Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* in the light of Jung's analytical psychology has illustrated how different levels of conflict can cause man's psychological and mental disintegration. It has also elucidated that the psychic is nothing but the mental patterns that are in function inside the human mind. These mental patterns, however, are not the product of the Kantian a priori transcendental powers of the mind, but, rather, the product of miscellaneous processes of free association that are shaped by symbols, archetypes, and archetypal ideas. The reading of Lessing's *Briefing* has also touched upon the essentiality of having a multi-dimensional psychological profiling if a therapist is to provide a real treatment for the patient. At the end of the narrative, the reader is informed that, upon consulting a psychiatrist at a teaching hospital and a neurologist about Watkins' case, "their skilled and compassionate diagnoses, while authoritative, were quite different from each other's. They agreed about nothing at all" (Lessing 251). The process of counselling is thus shown to be a specific and a highly complicated process. It is not one psychological and universal approach that is to be applied to a wide range of cases, but, rather, a multiplicity of different psychological approaches that can accommodate different epistemological, ontological, and religious backgrounds that are inseparable from people's mental disposition and psychological orientation.

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