

**Mystery and Politics in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* and  
*Ben, in the World***

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**Abstract**

Doris Lessing, one of the most prominent women British and Rhodesian writers of the post war generation, Lessing has explored most of the important ideas, ideologies, and social issues of the twentieth century. Her works display a broad range of interests and concerns, including racism, communism, feminism, psychology, and mysticism. In *The Fifth Child* and *Ben, in the World*, Nobel she creates a character whose naming attempts to socialize the unsocialisable. In the first novel, Harriet and David Lovatt raise four endemic children, until the birth of Ben, their atavistic son. Exiled, Ben reappears as the sequel's title character, a monstrous throwback searching the globe for home. *The Fifth Child* and its sequel serve to confuse the reader and that the flat characterization, not only hinders the reader from identifying and even sympathizing with the character, but also from addressing some cardinal issues, such as the otherness in our society and the controversial question of the coexistent humanity and animalistic in human beings.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child* and  
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Doris Lessing, one of the most prominent women British and Rhodesian writers of the post war generation, Lessing has explored most of the important ideas, ideologies, and social issues of the twentieth century. Her works display a broad range of interests and concerns, including racism, communism, feminism, psychology, and mysticism. The major unifying theme of her work is the need for individuals to confront their most fundamental assumptions about life as a way of avoiding preconceived belief systems and achieving psychic and emotional wholeness.

From her post-colonial articulation in her first novel *The Grass is Singing*, which she brought with her to London from Southern Rhodesia, where she grew up, was published in 1950, she has been a well known and active writer for forty-seven years. And then *The Golden Notebook*, Which was published in 1962 to massive approval, must have lost some of her original readers through its elaborate and programmatic structure, even as it collected huge number of new ones, who inevitably ignored the way in which this novel drew on and developed the material of the earlier work.

Lessing published a cautionary tale about a kind, liberal couple with a large house, four well-loved children, friends and holidays galore. Into this happy home is born 'The Fifth Child', a violent, monstrous boy whose presence threatens the family's stability and raises dreadful philosophical questions. Parents love, Different creature ever find in the social order. *The Fifth Child* was published in 1988. In several interviews, Lessing mentioned that her inspiration for writing *The Fifth Child* comes from numerous sources. The first one originates from her longstanding interest in little people. The novel *The Fifth Child* dwelled in Lessing's mind for quite some time and it was influenced by diverse sources.

However, Lessing did not totally concur with some critic's readings which tend to narrow down the scope of *The Fifth Child* by addressing only one issue. Just as grey areas always exist, she also feels ambivalent about whether or not what Ben causes all around him is evil.

Lessing, now in her eighties, provides few answers in this sequel *Ben, in the World*. Ben is eighteen, through he looked much older. He is not a normal human being, but Ben searching himself what he is exactly and family others also think the same question. The old lady who looks after him for while and teaches him how to keep clean and brush his unruly hair, thinks he might be a yeti. Others call him a throw back or beast. Sometimes he cannot restrain a bark or growl, but, when he speaks, Ben has an educated accent.

Lessing has written *Ben, in the World* to satisfy some readers curiosity about what happens to Ben later and it received some negative comments from book reviewers. From the start, we see how Ben's inability to understand the world makes him prey to the abuse of every person he meets. After being utilized as a labourer, Ben becomes a drugs courier, to France. There he is grounded until a director spots him and takes him to Brazil to make him famous in a film about a primitive race.

The research is common in arguing that the differences in Lessing's writing style between *The Fifth Child* and its sequel serve to confuse the reader and that the flat characterization, not only hinders the reader from identifying and even sympathizing with the character, but also from addressing some cardinal issues, such as the otherness in our society and the controversial question of the coexistent humanity and animalistic in human beings.

As for literary critic's responses, some of them focus on the subgenres that Lessing utilizes and on the conflicts that the use of these genres create to disturb the reader's responses by taking critics arguments which focus on the luminosity of Ben as the starting point, this research wants to probe into the character, Ben, who seems to embody the threshold between human and animal, and who disrupts this very boundary by unsettling our definitions of human and animal.

A series of questions are asked and scrutinized. Ben a human with an uncontainable and insatiable animalist, or is he an animal just covered by the body of a human being. When Rita, a prostitute in *Ben, in the World* taunts herself "Well, aren't we all (human animals?)" (42), can we transform this irony into a philosophical question, which focuses on not the intricate relation between

human and animal, but on how and where can the self place itself in the face of this other? What I mean here is when critics lay their focus on how Ben embodies the “marginal matters of the self as abject” (Robbins 94), assumptions as such focus on the clean and competent entity of the self and how the self thus feels perturbed by the very existence of Ben who seems unclassifiable to them.

Then, can we shift our focus to Ben, to this creature who is outside of the self-Actualization and self-consciousness but whose exteriority still calls for the ethical attention from the self? This paper endeavours to set out an ethical reading of *The Fifth Child* and its sequel *Ben, in the World* by drawing on Maslow’s theory of self-Actualization. The research argues that the Lovatt’s in *The Fifth Child* embody the Heideggerian homeliness of ontology, whose rejection and exclusion of Ben represents the secluded interiority of the self.

Ben is away from home and is wandering around in the world in the sequel, he encounters two characters (Mrs. Briggs and Teresa) who become his substitutions and who not only take responsibility for him. Thus, the first half of this paper will take a short detour to discuss Maslow’s ethics theory, and the second half of it is the examination of how Maslow theory can provide a different perspective to read Lessing’s two books on Ben.

Even though Maslow does not see the animal as other, Ben, who seems to be a human being and an animal, arouse the ethical response from the self? Despite the fact that ethics is not the same as politics, his theory still aims for a just society practiced in political terms, in which ethics for the sake of a more just society. An Ethical Reading of Doris Lessing five of politics, that is, for the sake of a more just society. Then, can we undertake a reading of Lessing’s *The Fifth Child* and *Ben, in the World* by incorporating a political dimension to the extent that the ethical is political, or, to put another way, can we read Lessing’s two books on Ben as the very practice of ethics in terms of textual politics.

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