

Doris Lessing's *The Sweetest Dream*: Disillusion, Realism, and the Failure of Utopian Dreams

Dr. K. Santha Kumari

Assistant Professor, Department of Mathematics and Humanities, Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Technology

Abstract

This article examines *The Sweetest Dream* by Doris Lessing as a critical re-evaluation of twentieth-century utopian idealism and its moral aftermath. Returning to social realism, Lessing reconstructs the disillusionment of the 1960s through the lives of three generations of the Lennox family, exposing the collapse of communism, post-war radicalism, and African socialism. The novel contrasts ideological rhetoric with domestic responsibility, positioning Frances Lennox's home as a counterpoint to failed political movements. Through characters such as Johnny, Sylvia, and Rose, Lessing reveals how revolutionary dreams deteriorate into self-interest, corruption, and emotional neglect. Yet the narrative resists nihilism by foregrounding endurance and compassion as alternative ethical responses to historical failure. Ultimately, *The Sweetest Dream* suggests that while political dreams dissolve under human weakness, sustained moral commitment within everyday life remains the only viable form of redemption.

Keywords: Utopian disillusionment, political idealism, Generational conflict, Feminist realism, Ideological collapse, Domestic Humanism.

After *The Good Terrorist* Doris Lessing remained preoccupied with the fading colours of communism, the personal and psychological wreckage of war, and the disillusion of a whole European generation. Her later work includes the Jane Somers novels on aging, *African Laughter* (1992) recalling her visits to Zimbabwe, the probing novellas *The Fifth Child* (1988) and *Ben in the World* (2000) on innate human evil, and two volumes of autobiography, *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997). Even her shift from social realism to the cosmic allegory of the Canopus in Argos series did not alter her abiding concerns with power, faith, morality, and endurance. In all her fiction, realism and imagination operate as complementary rather than opposed modes.

The Sweetest Dream (2001) returns Lessing to realism, though it still fuses fable and social chronicle. Written when she was eighty-two, the novel re-examines the lost dreams of the 1960s—the idealism of communism, the illusions of liberation, and the decay of moral purpose in post-colonial Africa. The “sweetest dream,” as critic John Rockwell observed, is both the Communist vision and the 1960s dream of personal and social betterment: sweet in aspiration, unreal in substance.

Structure and Setting

The novel, un-chaptered and loosely chronological, moves between London's Hampstead and the fictional African country of Zimlia. It spans three generations of the Lennox family and a circle of friends shaped by war, socialism, and shifting ideals. The first half centres on Frances Lennox, abandoned wife of Johnny

Lennox, a charming but parasitic communist agitator. With her sons Andrew and Colin she occupies part of her formidable mother-in-law Julia Lennox's house, which gradually becomes a refuge for rebellious teenagers—the “war children” or “waifs and strays” of the 1960s. Frances's kitchen becomes a microcosm of a generation adrift between idealism and irresponsibility. Julia finances the boys' education and rescues Sylvia, the sickly daughter of Johnny's second wife, nurturing her until she becomes a doctor.

The novel's second half follows Sylvia to Zimlia, a thinly disguised Zimbabwe. There she works in a primitive bush hospital amid poverty, AIDS, and corruption. The revolutionary dream of African socialism, like Europe's communist one, has curdled into greed and misrule. Andrew, now an international lawyer for “Global Money,” ironically abets this corruption through financial aid schemes. Lessing contrasts Sylvia's integrity and self-sacrifice with the cynicism of Johnny's old comrades—Rose, Geoffrey, Daniel—who have become bureaucrats and journalists profiting from disillusion.

Themes and Character Patterns

Lessing weaves the private and political to show how every ideal degenerates in practice. Julia embodies the lost pre-war European order; her dream of a civilized Germany dies with two world wars. Johnny's “dream” of a communist paradise becomes self-serving rhetoric. Frances's dream is domestic and humane—the wish for love, order, and a meaningful life—but she is perpetually exploited by others' needs. Sylvia inherits the remnants of these aspirations, turning them into service rather than ideology. When corruption closes her African hospital and slander drives her out, she brings two orphaned black boys to London for education, thus carrying the moral burden of endurance that runs through all Lessing's fiction.

The “dreamers” of the 1960s, Lessing suggests, were undone by their self-deception. Frances's home, once a symbol of generous openness, becomes a refuge for the broken: her ex-husband's discarded wives, a colleague's abandoned children, and finally the African boys. The circle completes itself; altruism shades into resignation. Lessing's vision of motherhood here extends from the literal to the archetypal—the “earth mother” sustaining life amid decay.

Realism and Allegory

Although described as a “return to realism,” *The Sweetest Dream* continues Lessing's fusion of fact and fable. Like *Memoirs of a Survivor* or *Mara and Dann*, it borders on the allegorical: Frances as endurance, Sylvia as renewal, Rose as malice and envy, Johnny as failed revolutionary idealism. The African episodes echo Lessing's own revisits to Zimbabwe—emotion recollected in anger. The narrative's digressive structure mirrors the moral fragmentation of its world; its un-chaptered flow imitates memory itself.

The Meaning of the “Sweetest Dream”

Every central figure cherishes a “sweet dream”: Julia's pre-war paradise, Johnny's communism, Frances's loving household, Sylvia's humanitarian mission. Each dream proves ephemeral—destroyed by war, selfishness, or corruption. Yet the persistence of compassion amid failure gives the novel its moral gravity. In Celia's final chant about “poor little Johnny,” Lessing turns the family saga into fable: history repeats its follies, but endurance and empathy survive.

Character Dynamics in Doris Lessing's *The Sweetest Dream*

Sylvia lands in London and calls Colin, seeking permission to bring two black children, Clever and Zebe-

dee. Colin receives her warmly. She meets Frances—now past seventy—along with Rupert, Margaret, William, Sophia, and little Celia. Sylvia tells them the boys must go to school and become doctors, then plans to leave for Somalia to work for war victims. Tired, she goes to sleep on the sofa: “She sank deep into her past, into the arms that were waiting for her” (469)—a deep sleep she never wakes from.

Frances is back to “square number one,” faced again with waifs to nurture. Colin insists they cannot be abandoned: “If a couple of kittens try to crawl out of the bucket that they are being drowned in, you don’t push them walk in” (472). Celia, who inherits Sylvia’s funds, refuses to help, so Frances takes Clever and Andrew agrees to support Zebedee. Johnny, now old and living on his pension, still entertains old comrades. Celia teasingly calls him “poor little Johnny” (479).

The novel closes ambiguously—is it tragedy, because of Sylvia’s death and Africa’s lost dream, or comedy, reflecting a generation’s futile search for meaning amid nuclear threats and social protests? Lessing’s cynicism is palpable as she writes: “But so what. It is always the Dream that counts” (478). The novel’s title recalls both the sweetness and futility of political dreams.

The narrative revolves around four major women—Julia, Frances, Sylvia, and Rose—and four marginal men—Johnny, Andrew, Colin, and Franklin—along with a range of secondary figures like Philip, Rupert, Father McGaire, Mr. Mandizi, Philida, and Sister Molle, who illuminate the moral contrasts of the story. Johnny Lennox, an early convert to communism, symbolizes blind faith. Charismatic and articulate, he impresses others but remains deluded: when confronted with proof of communist atrocities, he insists, “It is all the capitalists’ manipulation.” He is selfish and self-indulgent, abandoning wives and burdening Frances with Sylvia, the daughter of Phyllida. Even in old age, he retains a false grandeur: “Late, before the guests left, Johnny would lower his voice and lift his glass. And propose a toast ‘To him’—that him being possibly the cruelest mother who had ever lived” (478).

Andrew and Colin represent contrasting temperaments. Andrew is disciplined and pragmatic, “more sedate, more in control of himself,” while Colin is sensitive and emotional. Both disapprove of their father. Andrew calls him “a stupid man” (201), while Colin rages at Frances for filling the house with “waifs and strays” (221). Yet they deeply love their mother. Andrew grows into a polished international lawyer working for “Global Money,” believing he helps developing nations, though blind to the corruption he sustains. His good intentions fizzle out, symbolized when he fails to send books Sylvia requests for her hospital.

Colin, on the other hand, matures into a writer. Moved by Sylvia’s anguish over Africa, he publishes her story in *The Monitor*, inadvertently provoking Rose’s malicious attempts to discredit Sylvia. After Sylvia’s death, Colin’s compassion reasserts itself—he welcomes Clever and Zebedee and ensures they are not abandoned, shaping the novel’s moral resolution.

Frances, the novel’s true protagonist, embodies endurance. Born in the 1920s, she combines old-world sensibility with modern resilience. Her marriage to Johnny—“more in love with him than with his ideology”—ends in betrayal, yet she sustains herself and others through work and compassion. Initially proud and independent, she resists Julia’s help but eventually surrenders to practicality. Her house becomes a haven for misfits and ideological refugees of the 1960s.

A gifted writer for *The Defender*, Frances dreams of acting but sacrifices it for economic survival. Life repeatedly forces her to resume the role of caregiver: first to Sylvia, later to Phyllida, and finally to Clever and Zebedee. As she reflects, “Saying no is often like those people who divorce one partner only to marry another exactly the same in looks and character” (68). Her life philosophy becomes acceptance. Colin aptly calls her “a glutton for punishment” (266).

Her relationship with Johnny remains ambivalent. She once shared his “great dream” of socialism, and even after recognizing its folly, she cannot call him stupid: “Well, of course he was stupid. But she had never admitted it... After all she had taken from him, all the shit, she had never been able to say to herself... that Johnny was stupid” (201). When Johnny cruelly insults Colin, she snaps: “I’ll kill him. One of these days I’ll kill him. How could he do that?” (200).

Frances’s later years bring companionship with Rupert, her colleague from *The Defender*. Their bond is tender and realistic: “How easy it was to be happy... How could it be that things were so easy that had been difficult, wearisome, painful?” Her fantasy of “a man in her life who would not be a mad egotist, like Johnny” (65) is at last fulfilled.

Rose Trimble, the angry rebel, embodies the envy of the deprived. Resenting the Lennoxes’ cultured world, she feels “a kind of rage... because these people had all this as a kind of inheritance, and she, Rose...” (150). Like Franklin, she rebels through petty crime, shoplifting to affirm control. Her bitterness toward Sylvia exposes her moral decay.

Through these intertwined lives, Lessing portrays the erosion of utopian ideals. Each dream—Julia’s old Europe, Johnny’s communism, Frances’s domestic peace, Sylvia’s Africa—ends in failure. Yet the capacity for love and endurance persists. Frances, Sylvia, and Colin carry the novel’s moral centre: they do not redeem the world, but they refuse to abandon it.

The Sweetest Dream concludes where it began—in Frances’s home, with new orphans to care for and the cycle of compassion renewed. The dream may fail, but as Lessing insists, “It is always the Dream that counts” (478).

Generational Madness and Moral Disillusion

In *The Sweetest Dream*, Lessing presents the unique behaviour of characters coloured by the madness displayed by three generations of the Lennox family. Philip and Julia represent the first generation, Johnny, Frances, and Phyllida the second, while Andrew, Colin, and their friends form the third. Julia still abides by honourable upper-class values, eroded somewhat by the aftermath of war, but it is the post-war generations who are most affected by moral and psychological chaos. They are drawn toward delinquent behaviour, naively believing it serves the creation of a better society.

In her Author’s Note, Lessing clarifies her intention:

“I am not writing volume three of my autobiography because of possible hurt to vulnerable people. Which does not mean I have novelized autobiography... I hope I have managed to recapture the spirit of, particularly, the sixties, that contradictory time which, looking back and comparing it with what came later, seems surprisingly innocent.”

She adds that some events described in the novel were moved forward in time, notably the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which she saw as irrational and self-destructive:

“There has never been a more hysterical, noisy and irrational campaign... Students of the dynamics of mass movements will find it all in the newspaper archives, and I have had letters from them on the lines of, ‘But that was crazy. Just what was it all about?’” (2001)

For Lessing, the CND’s extremism epitomizes the radical tendency to prioritize ideology over the welfare of real people. Her disgust at such fanaticism drives *The Sweetest Dream*, a novel written with the rare combination of emotional energy and mature wisdom. As one critic observes, it combines “the seasoned perspective on humanity that comes from having spent so many years in its company,” with the “expansiveness reminiscent of Balzac.”

Remarkably, this literary epic unfolds largely in a kitchen—the domestic centre of Frances and Julia Lennox’s home—where an assortment of radicals and outcasts gather. Spanning from the idealistic 1960s to the disillusioned 1980s, the novel captures the era’s shifting political and moral landscape.

The narrator’s voice, shaped by hindsight, is crucial to the novel’s effect. It reflects not only the period depicted but also the time of its composition, lending retrospective irony and distance. Lessing departs from conventional realism, often “telling” rather than “showing,” yet her backstory and narration build psychological and historical depth rather than exposition.

Much of the drama arises from generational conflict—the bombastic dogmatism of “comrade” Johnny rebuking his son’s novel, or the moral shock of Julia when Sylvia brings a male colleague to her room:

“It seemed to Julia terrible that any young man, ‘a colleague,’ should come home with Sylvia and sleep in her room... it should matter that a man was in a young woman’s room.” (94)

Suffused with the politics and economics of several eras, the novel’s most powerful moments occur around the communal dining table, symbol of shared illusions and disillusionment. Lessing’s treatment of feminism is deliberately unsentimental: she portrays it casually and ironically through figures like Phyllida and Rose, finding them shallow or self-serving.

Instead, Lessing focuses on the quiet heroism of those who act rather than theorize. She makes clear that “whatever good gets done in the world is usually the work of people like Frances and Sylvia,” who respond directly to suffering, whether it is “an abandoned child or a malaria-stricken village.” In contrast, figures like Johnny—who “had spent probably two-thirds of his life in comradesly luxury hotels in the Soviet Union, Poland, China, Czechoslovakia,”—represent ideological emptiness.

Everyone—from feminists to astrologers—receives Lessing’s satirical attention, yet *The Sweetest Dream* never descends into misanthropy. Despite her harsh critique of Zimlia’s corrupt leaders, she still acknowledges the unsung “minor officials, who are competent, not corrupt ... anyone who understood would go for help to some comparatively lowly office run by a man or a woman who, if there were any justice, would be openly running the country and who in fact were what everything depended on.” (49)

Though the novel exposes “the devil” in the fantasy of leftist utopianism, it ultimately honours those who keep society from collapsing. As the critic Justine Ettler notes in *The Observer*:

“Lessing has always been a generous writer... she effortlessly captures what is quintessential in each of her charming characters. She has claimed that her quest for the truth propelled her into becoming a writer. No doubt it is the same impetus that has produced a volume that speaks so loudly to the present. In its critique of mass-produced thinking and the long-term personal effects of war, *The Sweetest Dream* approaches a universal truth: both damage people’s capacity to give and receive love.” (July 2005)

The second half of the novel shifts to Zimlia, a fictional southern African country mirroring Zimbabwe. Sylvia, one of Frances’s household “waifs,” becomes a doctor there, confronting corruption, poverty, and AIDS. The revolutionary ideals of independence have decayed into greed and hypocrisy. Her friends in England remain blind to Africa’s real suffering, while international aid agencies display bureaucratic arrogance and ignorance. Through Sylvia’s disillusionment, Lessing exposes the moral bankruptcy of ideology and the failure of human empathy.

Ultimately, the novel shows that humanity’s greatest illusion—the “sweetest dream”—is the belief that people can work together selflessly for the common good. Yet even as Lessing dismantles this ideal, she honours the endurance and compassion of individuals like Frances and Sylvia, who continue to act with decency despite disillusionment.

The Sweetest Dream thus stands as both an indictment of ideological blindness and a celebration of ordinary moral courage. It reflects Lessing's lifelong theme: that while utopian ideals collapse under the weight of human weakness, love, endurance, and honesty remain the only forms of redemption.

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