

**MIRRORS, AGEING, AND THE FEMALE GAZE IN DORIS
LESSING'S LOVE, AGAIN / MIROIRS, VIEILLISSEMENT ET
REGARD FÉMININ DANS LOVE, AGAIN DE DORIS LESSING¹**

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Résumé : Cet article examine le rôle symbolique du miroir dans le roman « Love, Again » de Doris Lessing, afin d'interroger à la fois les attentes sociétales concernant le vieillissement et la sexualité, et de mettre en évidence la nature fragmentée de l'identité humaine. À travers diverses traditions littéraires, le miroir a été associé à l'idée de construction de l'identité et a souvent fonctionné comme un espace liminal où les protagonistes sont confrontés à leurs illusions comme à leurs réalités. Dans « Love, Again », Lessing mobilise le symbole du miroir pour représenter la complexité des difficultés rencontrées par une femme âgée lorsqu'elle navigue entre amour et désir. Ce symbole s'inscrit également dans les discours féministes, en particulier ceux portant sur le regard, la performativité et les rôles de genre liés à l'âge. Par une approche interdisciplinaire intégrant les études culturelles et la critique littéraire féministe, l'article met en lumière la façon dont les miroirs opèrent comme des lieux de révélation et de tension entre l'authenticité individuelle et les attentes sociales qui perpétuent des structures rigides concernant l'identité féminine et la désirabilité.

Mots-clés : vieillissement, Doris Lessing, regard féminin, âgisme genré, symbolisme du miroir.

Abstract: This paper explores the symbolic role of mirrors in Doris Lessing's novel "Love, Again", both to interrogate societal expectations regarding ageing and sexuality, and to emphasise the fragmented nature of human identity. Across literary traditions, the mirror has been associated with the idea of the construction of identity, and it has often functioned as a liminal space where the protagonists confront both their illusions and their realities. In "Love, Again", Lessing employs the mirror symbol to depict the complexities of an older woman's struggles while navigating love and desire. This symbol also aligns with feminist discourses, particularly those addressing the gaze, performativity, and gender roles according to age. Through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates cultural studies and feminist literary criticism, the paper calls attention to the fact that mirrors serve as sites of revelation and conflict between individual authenticity and social expectations that promote rigid structures regarding female identity and desirability.

Keywords: ageing, Doris Lessing, female gaze, gendered ageism, mirror symbolism.

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing's novel *Love, Again* (1996) offers fertile ground for examining the intersections between ageing, gender, and self-perception, as they are mediated through the recurring symbol of the mirror. Although critical work on Lessing has addressed themes such as female subjectivity, sexuality, and performativity, the specific role of mirror imagery as a site of negotiation between a woman's inner identity and the external social norms that dictate her behaviour remains underexplored. This paper positions the mirror as a central analytical device for understanding how cultural scripts that refer to ageing and femininity become inscribed upon the female body, often resulting in processes of internal fragmentation and self-surveillance.

This analysis draws on feminist theories of the gaze and age studies to foreground the novel's interrogation of the pressure imposed on older women in contemporary society. Sarah Durham, the protagonist, experiences an evolving relationship to her own mirror image, and her story becomes an illustrative example of how women navigate the tensions between personal desire and the cultural narratives

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that circumscribe their role. The central questions of this analysis are related to how Lessing uses mirror imagery to reveal the internal tensions experienced by ageing women and how the protagonist's successive mirror encounters illuminate broader feminist concerns regarding identity formation, self-perception, and later-life sexuality.

The investigation is grounded in feminist theories of the gaze (Mulvey), gender performativity (Butler), and female subjectivity (Beauvoir), especially since these theoretical strands allow for an examination of how patriarchal standards of beauty and desirability shape Sarah Durham's perception of her ageing body and influence her emotional responses. Feminist literary criticism also supports the reading of the mirror as a site of normative surveillance but also as a potential space for reclaiming female agency. The analytical framework also integrates age studies to contextualize the protagonist's experience within broader cultural narratives that frame older women as desexualised, invisible, or even socially marginal. This methodology does not seek to establish a psychological profile of the main character, but rather to reveal the cultural logics that promote the systemic patterns of gendered ageism and female decline narratives.

2. Ageing, desire, and the constraints of the gaze

Throughout history, mirrors have been used both in artistic and literary discourses with a double purpose, that of an "antinomy between externality and inwardness, between surface and depth, deflective plane and receptive recess, replication and absorption, recursion and incursion." But beyond mere reflection, the mirror "also turns inwardly", it "captures and holds" reality in "an unreal space beyond its surface." (Petrov, 2010: 233)

In literature, mirrors have frequently served as metaphors for self-discovery and introspection; they have also been employed to reflect the complex interplay between ageing, identity, and societal expectations regarding women. As Giacinto Di Pietrantonio (2023, web) observes, the mirror concept "has existed in all cultures and, in part, continues to exist in various forms today." He further discusses Picasso's painting, *Girl Before a Mirror* (1932, MoMA, New York), which portrays a young woman looking at herself in a mirror, only to observe not her own reflection, but that of another woman. This image parallels the themes explored by Doris Lessing in her novel *Love, Again*, where the motif of the mirror extends beyond self-examination. Instead, it functions as a mechanism for interrogating female selfhood.

Love, Again is a profound exploration of emotions related to female sexuality in later life and the way it collides with traditional social norms that render older women's romantic and sexual desires invisible. Sarah Durham, the protagonist of the novel, a successful theatre producer and writer in her sixties, experiences an unexpected resurgence of romantic and sexual longing, which, in turn, leads to a deep introspection on ageing, self-perception, and physical desire.

Sarah Durham engages with mirrors both as a means of self-exploration and an instrument to deal with an existential crisis. When she analyses her mirror reflection, she has moments of self-confrontation, compelling her to cope with the effects of patriarchal ideology and the cultural devaluation of female sexuality in later life. In the novel, Lessing manipulates mirrors on multiple levels: they are used as metaphors for both the male gaze and the internalized gaze of the female subject, and also as sites of performativity, where gender roles are challenged or reaffirmed. This mirror imagery is employed to highlight the ways in which older women are conditioned to see themselves through a patriarchal lens, rendering them invisible once they are deemed to have surpassed their reproductive and sexual prime.

Through Sarah's journey, Lessing tackles a thought-provoking topic referring to the constraints that lead to the marginalization of older women's sexuality. This struggle

prompts deep introspection on ageing and physical desire, while positioning the author within a broader feminist discourse on gendered ageism. Alice Ridout (2009), for instance, considers Doris Lessing as a “border-crosser” arguing that her work challenges the conventional limits imposed on women. Although she thoroughly described women and their inner feelings, Doris Lessing proved reluctant to being categorized as a feminist, which complicates the reception of *Love, Again*, since the novel engages with many feminist concerns while resisting clear ideological alignment. In a 2008 interview, Lessing clearly affirms her distancing from feminism stating that “they [feminists] don’t love me. I don’t love them either” (Lee, 2009: 23). More than once, she had overtly expressed her disapproval of being categorized by the critics as a “feminist writer.” The novel’s engagement with gender politics creates a tension generated by Sarah’s struggles with ageing and sexuality which mirror feminist critiques of patriarchal structures; yet they are presented in a deeply personal and introspective manner rather than through overt political messaging.

The narrative introduces Sarah as a woman who has fulfilled her traditional social roles as mother and wife. She loses her husband at a relatively young age, and, as a widow, she takes care of her children by herself. Now adults, they have moved on with their own lives. Living alone in her London apartment, Sarah is deeply immersed in her professional career, leaving little time for socializing or seeking a new long-term relationship. Having studied languages at university, Sarah now works as a manager in a prestigious theatre, occasionally taking on roles as a director and writer. At the beginning of the novel, Sarah is involved in the production of a play inspired by the journals of Julie Vairon, a young Frenchwoman from Martinique, who falls in love with a French officer and follows him to the south of France. As Sarah becomes increasingly drawn into Julie’s story, she unexpectedly finds herself entangled in romantic relationships, first with a young actor portraying the main character in the play and later with the director. Rather than experiencing love in a conventional sense, Sarah seems to fall into a state of love, leading her to struggle to maintain her emotional stability. This internal conflict prompts her to question herself whether old age (she is sixty-five) precludes the possibility of experiencing love with the same intensity as the younger generation: “Most men and more women – young women afraid for themselves – punish older women with derision, punish them with cruelty, when they show inappropriate signs of sexuality” (Lessing, 2007: 116). Although “not a young woman” but a “woman of a certain age . . . or even a bit older”, Sarah has a certain “vigour of her movements” and is “alert, full of energy” (Lessing 2007: 7). The principle which she organizes her life by is succinctly captured in the saying, “Beware of condemning other people, or watch out for yourself” (Lessing, 2007: 8).

Throughout the novel, Sarah’s internal monologue reveals a shift in her self-perception. In the beginning, she feels young and attractive when she thinks that the twenty-six-year-old Bill, one of the actors, is in love with her. It is what Simone de Beauvoir explains as being generated by a woman’s passion: “In the early days of a *grande passion* the woman becomes prettier, more elegant than formerly” (1956: 616). Sarah eventually understands her place in the world as an ageing woman when she learns that she has misinterpreted Bill’s attention when she sees him going out with a younger woman. During the time she thinks that he is in love with her, she frequently uses the mirror which becomes a metaphor for her identity crisis.

Thus, Sarah’s journey of self-discovery and acceptance begins with her acknowledging the fact that she is getting old and that, although she still feels young on the inside, her outward appearance is that of a woman her age. In other words, the fact that her reflected image does not match the way she feels about herself, leads Sarah to the understanding that she needs to find a place for herself in “a society where a

person's value still very much relates to harbouring a youthful and attractive physical appearance" (Oró Piqueras, 2014: 144).

Sarah ends up falling in love with younger men, not once but twice. While analysing her feelings, she understands that she has somehow internalised the expectations that society has placed on her, as a widow and an elderly woman. As she navigates her feelings for Bill, Sarah ends up misinterpreting his signals. Initially, she believes Bill's flirtations intensify because he is seeking professional support from her as a woman in a senior position and well connected in the theatre world, but she soon begins thinking that he genuinely desires her as a woman. After a while, she starts receiving love notes from Andrew, another young member of the cast and she understands that Andrew's attraction to her might be rooted in an Oedipal complex, as she reminds him of his own mother. Despite her uncertainty regarding Bill's intentions, Sarah gradually falls in love with him, even though she does not necessarily enjoy the feelings that she slowly becomes infused with:

She did not waste time saying it was absurd, for that went without saying. That weekend she was forced to acknowledge she had fallen a little in love with the young man. He had certainly taken enough trouble to make sure that she did. This was probably his way of dealing with life. (Lessing, 2007: 82)

Sarah's infatuation with Bill grows to the point where she experiences intense physical sensations of jealousy: "Knives had nothing on this: red-hot skewers were more like it, or waves of fire. She had not felt physical jealousy for so long, she had had at first to wonder, What is wrong with me? Have I got a temperature?" (Lessing, 2007: 119). Beauvoir's (1956: 552) observations on the emotional state of a woman in love resonate with Sarah's experiences: "Whether active or contemplative, her attitude is accompanied by feverish exaltation." She also notes the paradox of love: "[...] instead of the union sought for, the woman in love knows the most bitter solitude there is; instead of co-operation, she knows struggle and not seldom hate" (1956: 632).

The mirror serves as a recurring symbol throughout the novel as it reflects the internalized effects of traditional patriarchal expectations that equate female desirability with youth, thereby positioning sexual agency as a privilege of the young. When Sarah finds herself romantically attracted to younger men, she is confronted with internal and external tensions regarding the appropriateness of her desires. There is a cultural invisibility that society imposes on older women, which is deeply seated in ageism; this renders their emotional and sexual experiences as either grotesque or pitiable. Sarah's struggles emphasize the ways in which patriarchal conditioning forces women to see themselves through the lens of societal ridicule, fostering self-doubt regarding emotions that are but natural to human beings. It is what Simone de Beauvoir (1956: 549) describes as:

The ageing woman well knows that if she ceases to be an erotic object, it is not only because her flesh no longer has fresh bounties for men; it is also because her past, her experience, make her, willy-nilly, a person; she has struggled, loved, willed, suffered, enjoyed, on her own account. This independence is intimidating; she tries to disown it; she exaggerates her femininity, she adorns herself, she uses perfume, she makes herself all charm and grace, pure immanence.

In *Love, Again*, the mirror emerges as a powerful symbol of self-examination as the protagonist struggles with her newly acquired emotions related to falling in love with younger men. Mirrors in the novel are often associated with moments of self-doubt. For instance, Sarah's act of gazing into the mirror frequently coincides with her questioning of her femininity against the background of her age. The mirror becomes a

metaphorical battleground where Sarah confronts both her feelings and the expectations imposed by society on her as an ageing woman. Now in her sixties, she is no longer expected to play an active role since her reproductive years have long passed. Consequently, as an ageing woman she grapples with a kind of invisibility. Within this framework, Sarah's romantic involvement with a younger partner is deemed inappropriate, thus highlighting the restrictive norms surrounding ageing and desire:

Sarah looked in the mirror. [. . .] There are two phases in this illness. The first is when a woman looks, looks closer: yes, that shoulder; yes, that wrist; yes, that arm. The second is when she makes herself stand in front of a truthful glass, to stare hard and cold at an ageing woman, makes herself return to the glass, again, again, because the person who is doing the looking feels herself to be exactly the same (when away from the glass) as she was at twenty, thirty, forty. She *is* exactly the same as the girl and the young woman who looked into the glass and counted her attractions. She has to insist that *this* is so, *this* is the truth: not what I remember – *this* is what I am seeing, this is what I am. This. This.” (Lessing, 2007: 207-208)

According to Nonia Williams (2021: 72-73), in *Love Again* “Lessing rejects the notion of the shock or upset of the ageing outer body reflected in the mirror (or window) compared to an unchanging inner core.” As a result, a woman refuses to acknowledge that “the mirror shows an essential ‘true’ self, or an outer body that is incongruous with the inner; instead, the mirror enables Lessing to stage and make explicit the performativity of the self.” Similarly, Heather Swan (2002: 7) suggests that the mirror reflection is distorted and “although one might assume a woman’s pensive gaze at herself occurs primarily in mirrors made of glass, there are various types of mirrors that exist in the life of a woman, and these are developed in Lessing’s novels.” Thus, Lessing’s female protagonist eventually comes to contemplate her reflections in mental or figurative mirrors.

Ruth Olsen Saxton explores the effect mirrors have on people and the duality of “voices” in terms of mirrors used in Lessing’s fiction. She identifies one of the voices as “the familiar patriarchal voice, dominating the woman’s perception of herself, not only when she is actually looking into a mirror, but whenever her thoughts turn her appearance, from adolescence until sometime in the middle age” (Saxton, 1986: 89). Thus, in Lessing’s novel, female mirror-gazing achieves a dual purpose. The second voice, according to Saxton’s subdivision, consists of a “less familiar voice...the voice of another woman, a sister, or a friend, whose vision goes beyond the conventional standards or in whose presence the protagonist herself is able to gain a critical perspective on the patriarchal voice” (Saxton, 1986: 89). Saxton’s analysis suggests that both sides of the mirror contain a certain type of power, although it seems that the female voice is empowered on condition that it subjects itself to the patriarchal voice that dictates the norms.

The idea of doubling is supported throughout the entire novel as Sarah sees in her reflection both the image of societal rejection imposed on ageing women and her own personal struggle to reconcile this reality with her own desires. This duality underscores the tension that exists between individual autonomy and cultural prescription, illustrating how gendered norms dictate self-identity. In this sense, *Love, Again*, not only criticizes the marginalization of older women’s sexuality, but also reveals the extent to which women are conditioned to internalize and regulate their own desires in accordance with patriarchal dictates.

It can also be observed that age is not the main criterion when it comes to women analysing themselves. Lessing’s protagonist experiences moments of self-interrogation at some point, questioning the discrepancy between her *own* perception of herself and that of others. Does her actual physical appearance differ from what other people

perceive it to be? As Swan explains, “these questions are composed in women’s subconscious with the aid of another voice, that of society’s influence” (2002: 12). Throughout history, society has always maintained a watchful eye over women and their actions; in Lessing’s novel, the same omnipresent scrutinous eye follows Sarah while she performs her intimate act of mirror gazing.

Throughout the novel, there are many instances when Sarah reflects on how the others see her and many episodes when she mirrors herself in the behaviours and reactions of those around her, usually by comparing herself to others or by internalising the reactions that others have to her presence. After a conversation with Stephen at a restaurant, for example, they end up unconsciously echoing each other’s facial expressions and gestures:

They stood examining each other’s faces with curiosity, just as if they had not been sitting a few feet apart, for so long, talking. Their smiles confessed surprise, pleasure, and a certain disbelief, which latter emotion – or refusal of it – was confirmed when she shrugged and she made a spreading gesture with her hands which said, Well, it’s all too much for me! At which they actually laughed, at the way they echoed, or mirrored, each other. (Lessing, 2007: 42)

She occasionally gives the impression that she desires the approval of others; sometimes she looks into the mirror not only to contemplate on her own figure, but also to ‘fix’ herself, striving to create an image that she believes others might find more appealing. In another episode of the story, Sarah carefully dresses and assesses her reflection in the mirror, suggesting a conscious effort to shape her outward appearance: “She dressed carefully. Women of a certain age (and older) have to do this. What she wore became her, certainly. In the glass she saw a handsome woman in white linen who had about her a dewy look far from the competent asperities appropriate to her real age” (Lessing, 2007: 126).

The young people around Sarah function as a counter- or anti-mirror, offering her a stark reflection of her own ageing process. When she sees herself reflected in their image, she realizes that old age will likely deprive her of the possibility of love:

[...] we in fact seldom allow the realization to strike home sharp and cold: from being *this* – and she looked around at the young people – one becomes *this*, a husk without colour, above all without the lustre, the shine. And I, Sarah Durham, sitting here tonight surrounded mostly by the young (or people who seem young to me), am in exactly the same situation as the innumerable people of the world who are ugly, deformed, or crippled, or who have horrible skin disorders. Or who lack that mysterious thing sex appeal. Millions spend their lives behind ugly masks, longing for the simplicities of love known to attractive people. There is now no difference between me and those people barred from love, but this is the first time it has been brought home to me that all my youth I was in a privileged class sexually but never thought about it or what it must mean not to be. (Lessing, 2007: 122)

During this episode of mirror gazing, Sarah remembers her younger and more sexually desirable self, while also realising that there is no attractiveness in her current image. Maricel Oró Piqueras (2014: 146) considers that this thought generates Sarah’s impossibility to “imagine herself naked in front of a younger man, despite her uncontrollable feelings.” When she looks at herself in the mirror, she “understands why her feelings do not match the meanings attached to her ageing body.” Sarah further reflects on the idea that “There is a terrible arrogance that goes with physical attractiveness, and far from criticizing it, we even admire it” (Lessing, 2007: 123). Sarah purposefully attempts to combat her growing sense of age by deliberately making herself look younger: “Sarah found herself buying beauty creams, trying to find in her

mirror comfort in this aspect of her face or that, and buying clothes too young for her” (Lessing, 2007: 180). This pursuit of youthfulness marks an internal struggle against the passage of time and the expectations that society has of ageing women.

Additionally, the mirror symbolism is also explored in relation to the male gaze. The concept was framed by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, and it refers to the fact that men’s agency derives from a common patriarchal conscience that allows them to extend their fantasies onto the images of women. Although Mulvey discusses the concept in relation to cinema and film, positioning women as passive objects of the active male viewer’s desire, it can easily be extended to other areas as well. The concept of female gaze can be defined in opposition to the traditionally dominant male gaze. The fact that men are endowed with the power of the male gaze allows them to experience a feeling of control over women. Female gaze, on the other hand, offers an alternative perspective that allows women to transform from passive objects of the male gaze into individuals who own themselves.

Angela McRobbie (2009) argues that the female gaze has evolved alongside postfeminist culture, where women are increasingly depicted as consumers of their own image. Female gaze reclaims the act of looking and gives women the power to resist dominant ideologies. While looking at herself in the mirror, Sarah internalizes patriarchal standards of beauty and youth, reinforcing a sense of marginalization. As the narrative unfolds, Sarah gradually reclaims her agency. In one pivotal scene, Sarah gazes into the mirror and sees not an unattractive older woman, but a figure of strength and wisdom. This transformation marks Sarah’s rejection of the male gaze and her assertion of a self-defined identity, challenging the conventional narratives of ageing and femininity.

While society asks for differentiation among women based on their social status, role, and sexuality, the mirror reflection allows for a space of self-definition beyond these conventional archetypes. Judith Butler’s (1990) explanations related to gender as a performative construct are particularly helpful in analysing the relationship that Sarah develops with the mirror. According to Butler, gender is a socially constructed performance which leads both women and men to internalize behaviours, gestures, and appearances that are in accordance with societal expectations and traditional gendered norms. In this sense, femininity becomes what Butler describes as an “artifice, an achievement, a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms, which surface as so many styles of the flesh” (191). In Lessing’s novel, the mirrors reflect this performative dimension, as Sarah oscillates between internalised patriarchal expectations and her evolving sense of individual self.

Sarah’s inner monologues in front of the mirror lead her to accept her prescribed role as an older woman: she is expected to embrace desexualisation and contentment in solitude. At the end of the novel, Sarah has fully embraced the role society imposes on ageing women. Her final mirror reflection no longer sparks conflict but rather acceptance, symbolising her internal gratification:

Months have passed. Sarah is looking into her mirror, just as on the evening when we first saw her. At first glance she has not much changed, but a closer look says otherwise. She has aged by ten years. For one thing, her hair, which for so long remained as a smooth dulled metal, now has grey bands across the front. She has acquired that slow cautious look of the elderly, as if afraid of what they will see around the next corner. Sarah has changed, and so have the rooms she lives in. (Lessing, 2007: 294)

Because she repeatedly scrutinizes her own reflection in the mirror, Sarah actually reenacts—in an unconscious manner—societal scripts about female desirability. It is only later in the story that she realises the restrictive nature of these imposed

identities. The mirror then becomes a facilitator for self-affirmation and a means of deconstructing existing gender norms.

3. The mirror and the construction of identity

One of Lessing's recurring motifs is the fragmentation of identity, something that Sarah Durham experiences firsthand while looking at herself in the mirror. The mirror becomes a metaphorical arena where Sarah constructs her inner self, where she is confronted both with the gaze of the others, particularly men, and her own mental image, which she sometimes experiences as existing in a different specular paradigm: "This body of hers, in which she was living comfortably enough, seemed, accompanied by another, her young body, shaped in a kind of ectoplasm. She was *not* going to remember or think about it, and that was the end of it" (Lessing, 2007: 86).

One episode of mirror gazing involves Sarah examining her face this time, and not the entire body. Lessing suggests that Sarah is not actually perceiving her physical appearance in the mirror, but she is viewing her face through her mind's eye, thus through a mental mirror. Given that only a few months have passed since the beginning of the novel, Sarah's physical appearance should not have altered a lot. She is a sixty-five-year-old woman, and she looks as such, yet her internal metamorphosis points to the fact that she does not correspond to the stereotypical conventional societal image of the woman her age. She displays rather youthful characteristics that defy expectations. At the same time, readers can observe a fragmentation that results from a woman studying her physical appearance in the mirror. Lessing's protagonist examines each of her body parts, often wondering how other people, especially men, perceive her. Saxton's (1994: 95) criticism supports the idea of the doubling of the self by asserting that "Lessing [...] perpetuates a deep schism between mind and body, in which the female body is seen as a shell that severely limits woman's experience and both distorts and disguises her identity."

Sarah's past roles as wife and mother are deeply ingrained in her sense of self, making it difficult for her to detach from the clutter in her house that reminds her of her married life. She gradually comes to the understanding that her husband's interests had been projected onto her while they were together, leading her to unintentionally *mirror* him. Over time, her identity has been reshaped as to align with her husband's, obscuring her own interests. As she reflects on this realisation, she arrives at the unsettling conclusion "that very little in these four large rooms was here because of some considered choice of hers. A choice from that part of her she thought as *herself*. No, and she had decided to go through the rooms and throw everything out...well, almost everything" (Lessing, 2007: 11).

Sarah's reflection in the mirror is never static as it shifts and evolves according to the dynamic switch of her mood and feelings. As Lessing explores the emotional intricacies of love and gender dynamics, the mirror becomes a device through which Sarah confronts her own reality. Her evolving identity is negotiated both in relation to her past—i.e. her younger self—and to the other women around her, reflected through both literal and metaphorical mirrors. The mirror serves as a constant reminder of personal growth, allowing Sarah to redefine herself while acknowledging the vulnerabilities that accompany ageing. In this sense, her reflection holds both a transformative and a revelatory force, illustrating the continuous process of self-reinvention.

The mirror functions as a symbolic tool through which a woman could undergo a narcissistic experience, operating as the site where she is able to confront an idealized specular image that simultaneously reflects and alienates her true identity. As a result, the mirror becomes a tool that undermines the integrality of the selfhood because it reinforces both fragmentation and the inconsistency of a coherent self. At some point,

Sarah's sense of identity becomes fragmented, much like an image reflected in a broken mirror, emphasising the tensions inherent in self-perception:

There is absolutely nothing like love for showing how many different people can live inside one skin. The woman (the girl, rather) who dreamed of past loves thought adult Sarah a fool for being content with so little. The ordinary and quotidian Sarah, with whom after all she would be living (she did so hope) for the rest of her life, would not have spent half an hour with that daydreaming girl. But the Sarah she was most often, sodden with grief, was not one who had much energy to care about the others, all subsidiary players. She simply felt, suffered, endured in a hell of pain. (Lessing, 2007: 192)

Lessing uses both literal mirrors, of various shapes and sizes, and mental and metaphorical ones to describe the essence of her female protagonist. Because mirrors possess a dual capacity of *reflecting* and *creating* reality, Lessing's character undergoes a process of adjustment that enables her to navigate and balance both changes and the collective standard norms imposed by traditional society. Through this process, Sarah emerges wiser and more at peace with herself, gaining experience and realizing that her individual nature should not be suppressed by societal standards.

Lessing critiques the double standard that exists between men and women regarding later-life sexuality where older men's—such as Sarah's friend, Stephen—engagement in relationships with younger women is normalized, even celebrated, while older women who experience romantic longing are frequently met with disdain, thus leading to a fracture in their sense of identity: "If men, they are getting their own back for the years they have been subject to the sexual power of women" (Lessing, 2007: 116). Susan Sontag (1978: 31) argues that "a man, even an ugly man can remain eligible well into old age. He is an acceptable mate for a young, attractive woman. Women, even good looking women, become ineligible [...] at a much younger age." Furthermore, Saxton (1986: 85) considers that even though "[m]en do not usually carry mirrors", "the voice that governs the message of the mirror, in literature as in life, is a patriarchal voice, and the visual standards of female beauty, against which women measure their image in the frame of the mirror, are male-defined."

Sarah goes through an emotional turmoil which serves as a testament to the oppressive nature of these gendered double standards. She realises that the others would question her choice, so she begins to question herself. When she analyses her image in the mirror, Sarah confronts herself. Although she seems content with her looks, since she appears a lot younger than her actual age, she is also very aware of the burden caused by societal expectations, especially when it comes to women holding a certain position of authority: "And yet old women by the thousand – probably by the million – are in love and keep quiet about it. They have to" (Lessing, 2007: 152). At the beginning of the novel, Sarah seems very happy with her body and her life, in general, but, as the story progresses and she experiences love again, she becomes more and more aware of her ageing body and her position both as an older woman and a senior manager at a prestigious theatre.

Throughout *Love, Again*, Sarah repeatedly subjects herself to a critical investigation of her physical appearance. The harshness of her scrutiny alters the perception of her own identity, leading to frames of mind that ultimately affect her physical appearance as well. After the final performance of *Julie Vairon* in France, Sarah looks at herself in the mirror and comes to the realisation that her reflection has undergone an intriguing change. At times, she feels older than she perceives herself to be, while at other moments, a sense of youthfulness alters not only her self-perception but seemingly her physical appearance as well:

She went to her mirror several times during the course of this excursion around and about her room, for an inspection that deserved to be called scientific. That a woman's interaction with her mirror is likely to go through some changes during the decades goes without saying but...someone should bottle this, she announced aloud to the empty room, visible over her reflection's shoulder (Woman Gazing Curiously into Her Mirror)...Yes, someone should bottle these substances flooding me now [...] It is not merely that I feel twenty years younger, I look it... (Lessing, 2007: 169-170)

The descriptions provided by Lessing about women's reactions while studying their naked bodies in the mirror suggest that women of all ages practice this several times throughout their lives, although the author does not emphasize that this habit would represent a daily ritual in an average woman's life. What she does seem to suggest is that women perform this at times when they feel that they are going through a major physical change or moving through a new stage of their lives.

Sarah's exploration of her full nude body – something that she has not done in years – is prompted by the fact that her self-image is impacted because the three younger men who are part of the theatre group start expressing their feelings toward her while working on *Julie Vairon*. Although Sarah does not show them anything other than friendship, she repositions herself, embracing her status as an older woman, and refrains from any further action; the entire circumstance leads the protagonist to an extensive mirror gazing episode:

A woman of a certain age stands in front of her looking-glass, naked, examining this or that part of her body. She has not done this for...twenty years? Thirty? Her left shoulder, which she pushes forward, to see it better – not bad at all. She always did have good shoulders. And a very good back compared—long ago, of course—to the Rokeby Venus. [. . .] Hard to see her back, though: it was not a big mirror. Her breasts? A good many young women would be pleased to have them. But wait...what had happened to them? A woman can have had breasts like Aphrodite's (after all, at least one woman must have done), and the last thing anyone thought of, looking at them, was nourishment, but they have become comfortable paps, and their owners wonder, What for? To cradle the heads of grandchildren? Surely the right time for these paps was when she was a mother. (*What is Nature up to?*) Legs. Well, they weren't too bad now, never mind what they were. In fact her body had been a pretty good one, and it held its shape (more or less) till she moved, when a subtle disintegration set in, and areas shapely enough were surfaced with the fine velvety wrinkles of an elderly peach. (Lessing, 2007: 218)

Swan points out that it is not narcissism that causes this episode of self-examination, but the fact that Lessing's protagonist realises that her feelings regarding her physicality are provoked by men's opinions about her. Therefore, Sarah starts studying her “physical appearance in actual mirrors in order to come to an understanding of her ageing and how it relates to her reluctance to becoming romantically involved with a younger man” (2002: 47). Sarah is somehow torn between her feelings and desire toward a younger man and the fact that, were she to start a relationship with him, she would have to face social judgement as she would be breaking the traditional standards that society had set for women her age. If she were to symbolically remove her elderly mask and allow for the relationship with any of the younger men to develop, Sarah would become what society would consider a deviation from the norm.

The mirror has often represented a metaphorical level from which a woman starts defining her identity as it represents the moment in which one person comes face to face with their own self. However, it has also been perceived as a source of internal conflict, since many women become acutely aware of their true identity before a mirror, an awareness that may, in turn, collide with societal standards. Sarah exposes her body not

only to her own gaze, but also to those younger than her and by doing so she handles the social constraints and cultural beliefs regarding older women, thus coming to terms not only with the reflected image of her body, but also with her inner emotions. Sarah's constant examination of her image corresponds to what Mike Hepworth (2000: 46) interprets as "an interactive process through which connections are made between the personal subjective self of the viewer and the external world of other people." He thus points to the fact that, while analysing themselves in a mirror, the subjects manage to construct meaning by establishing a connection between their image in the mirror, their self-perception, and the perception that others have about them. This separation between her inner age and the outward appearance becomes obvious from the beginning of the novel, when Sarah Durham is trying to link her internal feelings related to her age with her physically aged appearance. Upon realizing that she is not "that old", Sarah grasps the importance of embracing the new roles that have been assigned to her now. She believes that love and desire are the privilege of the young and attractive, that is why she does not feel entitled to access emotions related to physical attractiveness and passion.

Indeed, in Lessing's novel, the ageing protagonist establishes a symbolic connection with the mirror which, in turn, becomes a means to deconstruct and fragment the female self. Therefore, the mirror performs a double function: on the one hand, it gives Sarah Durham a sense of wholeness and unity, while on the other, it fragments and alters her identity, thus leading to an inevitable confrontation with the *Other*. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" resonates in Lessing's depiction of her female protagonist. The mirror functions both as a space where they can redefine and reclaim their subjectivity and as a medium through which women see themselves as "the Other". Much like Julie, who must look into the mirror to be able to draw her self-portrait, Sarah frequently finds herself examining her reflection. Just as Julie is perceived as the *Other* due to her exotic background and her rejection of social conventions, choosing to live alone in the woods, Sarah, too, could be cast as the *Other* for defying traditional norms about the age at which women should still be sexually active. Although at the beginning of the novel Sarah feels quite comfortable with the image reflected in her mirror and the way she is ageing, the more she analyses her own reflection and the more the rollercoaster of emotions takes over her, the more she starts questioning her identity and her place in a society that sees ageing not just as an issue related to physical decline, but also as behaviour-related.

Beauvoir (1956: 547) explains that the evolution of a woman throughout her life differs greatly from that of a man, which could contribute to the construction of a fragmented self; it is more discontinuous because "each period in the life of a woman is uniform and monotonous; but the transitions from one stage to another are dangerous and abrupt; they are manifested in crises [...] which are more decisive than in the male. Whereas man grows old gradually, woman is suddenly deprived of her femininity." In this latter stance, the mirror does not actually duplicate Sarah's true reflection but amplifies the image that she would like to project to others hence the fracture of her identity. Thus, the mirror does not become an instrument that can add to self-knowledge, but a means of self-assurance and validation, reflecting only what is visible on the surface. The mirror has always been a master of illusion that has had the ability to manipulate human perception on things. That is why Sarah comes to see herself as younger than she actually is, particularly under the influence of her newfound confidence which stems from the fact that much younger men find her attractive. In one instance, Sarah examines herself in the mirror with all the lights on and she finds herself satisfied with the image reflected: "Not bad, she supposed. She looked a handsome middle-aged matron. A hairdresser had improved her hair-do: a small smooth head went

well with clothes more expensive than anything she had bought for years” (Lessing, 2007: 17).

Sarah experiences three mirror stages throughout the narrative which reflect the development and transformation of her identity. The pre-mirror stage– which aligns with the time before her husband’s death– represents a time when Sarah embraces her roles as a wife and mother. She feels a sense of self-fulfilment, both at home and at her workplace. The mirror stage corresponds to her late sexual awakening, when she almost simultaneously falls in love with two men who are significantly younger than herself. During this stage, Sarah’s mirroring generates a sort of twin image, one that closely resembles the original, but is not entirely identical. The post-mirror stage occurs once Sarah has experienced the spiritual and sexual crisis of a woman beyond middle age. It is during this phase that Sarah returns to her home and consciously decides to find contentment with her current situation, despite the emotional turmoil mostly caused by the maudlin atmosphere that the play *Julie Vairon* had triggered. After the play ends, Sarah succeeds in liberating herself from the constraints of the mirror image. As Yechun Zhang (2017: 50) notes, Sarah finds the strength to “live a new life” and to affirm her “value as a woman.” At the beginning of the novel, Sarah Durham is depicted in her living room, so full of clutter that it could easily be mistaken for a junkroom. By the end of the story, Sarah emerges as a transformed person, and this is reflected in her immediate surroundings. Her living space is no longer overstuffed, but bright, white and airy.

The whole process of mirror gazing has helped her both to understand and embrace her position as an older woman. Oró Piqueras points out that “by looking at herself in the mirror as well as mirroring herself in others, she realises that an alternative path for ageing and older women does not exist.” After returning home, Sarah embraces and no longer denies the ageing process, thus “disposing herself of all the limiting constraints of being a woman in old age” and “admitting that being invisible to the male gaze is actually a source of freedom which a woman can distance herself and take some perspective” (2014: 149).

The novel represents Lessing’s attempt to reimagine cultural stereotypes. Nonia Williams (2021: 71) points out that the text of the novel “reinforces cultural narratives of ageing as decline; a pessimistic warning against sexual passion in later life,” at the same time not being realistic but “anachronistic, self-conscious and metafictional.” Sarah’s growing awareness of her ageing body is linked to the ageist and gendered expectations projected by societal norms. Sarah’s attempt to deliberately change her outward appearance – especially the way she dresses – to match her younger inner core does not represent an alienation from her ageing body, as Williams justly remarks, but an acceptance and realization that it signifies power.

In *Love, Again*, the protagonist looks into the mirror to discover her true self, an introspection that becomes increasingly analytical as the story progresses. While Sarah puts on a mask to present herself to others, there are moments when she feels so lost that she can barely contain her tears. Since falling in love, Sarah has transformed into a different person, concealing her true feelings behind a façade. Simone de Beauvoir observes that when a woman falls in love, she begins feeling differently, as she tries to adjust her behaviour in order to please the man she is in love with. Thus, she feels as though “she is getting out of her ordinary self, finding a new opulence in life: she feels herself an other, a new woman” (1956: 525). Sarah looks and feels younger: “The ichors that flooded her body created behind the face of Sarah, the face she and everyone know, a younger face, that shone out, smiling.” However, she later muses: “I simply can’t wait to go back to my cool elderly self, all passion spent. I suppose I’m not trapped in this hell for ever? I’m going to be really ill if I can’t stop this... and she

watched her reflection, which was that of a woman in love, and not a dry old woman” (Lessing, 2007: 160).

The moment that Sarah decides to embrace her ageing body and acknowledges her position as an older woman is the moment that she starts writing her own story that is no longer shaded by her constant questioning about how to meet the expectations that society has from ageing women. Saxton explains that during their journey of self-discovery, Lessing’s protagonists, including Sarah “confront their bodies in mirrors, mourn years of collision with patriarchal standards of female appearance, and, with a profound sense of the extent to which their bodies are merely temporary containers of some truer, essential self, begin to nurture that invisible self” (1994: 115).

Conclusions

Eric Williams (1993: 3) posits that human rationality and knowledge are constructed on “the perceived world.” Accordingly, theories of knowledge have been grounded in the idea that “seeing is believing”, therefore “visual perception is considered to be the primary mode of perception” and “human cognition was believed to function like a mirror that reflects the world at the end of our gaze.” Humans model their behaviour based on the rules that they mirror from society. Gender roles and age-related beliefs are examples of such societal constructs that derive from what could be considered as an extensive cultural suppression, with women historically relegated to the private sphere, expected to be subjected to men, and older women pressured to retire from public life once their primary roles – caregiving and reproduction – are considered fulfilled. In this context, older women face the expectation that they should not challenge their prescribed role by trying to present themselves in a different light or experiencing feelings that are traditionally deemed appropriate only for younger women, such as falling in love or being sexually active and attractive. The repression of such feelings inhibits their emotional stability and their self-expression, leading to their marginalization within society.

The mirror, as a literary symbol, transcends one’s mere reflection; it represents self-awareness, transformation, and the ongoing construction of identity. In *Love, Again*, mirrors are used as spaces of self-examination, revealing deeply ingrained gender norms, especially in relation to ageing and female sexuality in later life. Through her protagonist’s introspective experiences with her own reflection, Lessing accomplishes a subtle critique of the patriarchal conditioning that leads to a cultural invisibility imposed on older women. Throughout the narrative, Sarah’s perception of herself shifts under the influence of both her own evolving tumultuous emotions and external judgment. Her journey, from self-doubt to self-acceptance, positions the mirror as a dual symbol, a site of both societal oppression and a tool for self-liberation. At times, it offers moments of self-affirmation, allowing Sarah to reclaim her sense of self. Yet, it also serves as a reminder of the unrealistic standards imposed on women, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. For Sarah, looking into a mirror is not an exercise in self-reflection; rather, it becomes a performative act in which she negotiates her response to external pressures imposed upon her as an ageing woman.

In *Love, Again* mirrors are more than just vanity objects; they are dynamic spaces where the main character interacts with both her inner self and the outer world. Through these reflections, the novel provides insights into the conflict that arises between social standards and personal authenticity. This book is still relevant in contemporary discussions about gender and identity, as the mirror becomes more than a surface reflecting Sarah’s emotional struggles; it embodies the rigid social structures that regulate and diminish female identity. Lessing skilfully delivers a critique of the ways patriarchal norms dictate female desirability precisely because she effortlessly manages to frame Sarah’s self-perception through the mirror imagery.

As this paper has demonstrated, Lessing's investigation of gender and ageing calls into question the notion of female desirability. *Love, Again* advocates for a more inclusive understanding of women's emotional and sexual agency across all stages of life. The novel criticizes the constraints imposed on older women's sexuality and, through Sarah Durham's experiences, challenges the cultural erasure of older women's romantic and sexual desires. The novel's intention is to bring into view the voice of a character that would otherwise be pushed into the background. The mirror becomes an essential part of Sarah's transformative journey, ultimately revealing the multifaceted and dynamic nature of identity. Lessing's novel is anchored in the contemporary reality experienced by women, prompting readers to question the rigid norms that dictate female desirability and autonomy in later life.

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