

'ALIENATION' IN SELECTED WORKS BY DORIS LESSING

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Abstract:

This paper displays the effect of seclusion and alienation that the British writer Doris Lessing has experienced in her early youth in an isolated farm in South Rhodesia, after the family moved from Persia.

Lessing African experience as an alien to both black and white societies supplied her with a prospective comprehension of the white, middle-class and "consequently members of a ruling political establishment (who) have often found themselves alienated from their own privileged society and drawn to what is different in the native African culture, realizing that they can never be of it"¹

She lived her early age suffering from the impact of life in exile, life on the African veld that conquers its white colonialist invaders by its only parable alienation and thus her suffering from internal as well as external alienation is reflected in her novels.

This paper tries to probe the falsities of the colonial myth of white superiority, the affliction, loss of identity and the necessity of blacks and whites remaining separate.

Keywords: British colonists, alienation, African veld, exile, segregation, estrangement

Lessing's early life enables the reader to visualize her as an alienated soul searching for psychological and social recognition among individualized beings. In her early novels, Lessing gave expression to foible human anger, frustration and despair at society's injustice that Africa continually offers to its migrants and settlers. She even adopted the case of the white female in such a self centred society:

The predicament of the white woman in the African landscape is the subject of ... Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950), as well as ... *African Stories* and much of her *Children of Violence* series. The heroines of these books, Mary Turner, and Martha Quest, struggle for self-definition in a capitalistic society that cherishes the beautiful white girl as one of its most valuable commodities.²

It is in her works that Lessing made her strongest statements. Her fictional accounts of Africa and England bear a strong resemblance to her own life, and the heroines of her novels greatly resemble each other and their creator. Her works deal with the same themes: the problem of racism in British colonial Africa and the place of women in a male-dominated world and their escape from the social and sexual repression of that world. These are the themes of Lessing's life as well as her works. Thus, the protagonists in her novels can be regarded as human beings undertaking a quest to establish their free will and individualism. Lessing through her

individualized characters “engages her reader in a shared exploration of the aspects, causes and outcome of her protagonist's anguish ”.³

When *The Grass is Singing* (1950) was published , Western societies found it difficult to accept the novel with its white woman-black man relationship. Several suggestions were made for changes of the novel by many publishers like Michael Joseph in London and Alfred Knopf in New York asking for “an explicit rape, in accordance with the mores of the country”⁴. Lessing became furious and wondered whether men knew anything about the “mores of Africa ”.⁵ She was then recognized as the Kaffir-lover new writer from Africa.

In *The Grass is Singing*, Mary Turner is the image of the white woman raised on the veld by a drunkard father and a helpless mother. Her growth through childhood pursues a continuous transience from one farm house to another and from one dusty road to a similar one. This continues till her mother's death. She then age of sixteen abandons farm life and her father and departs for the city seeking inner knowledge and independence. Despite the enfolding loneliness characterizing her urban experience, whether in her administrative work or among her new friends , she enjoys “ her false sense of liberation as a working girl in the city.” To her as Lessing notes ironically , “south Africa is a wonderful place for the unmarried white woman”⁶. Mary's lack of self-knowledge is matched by her total incomprehension of the land and the native workers.

She dupes into marrying, just as Dick Turner dupes into it as the latter is enchanted by her image in the false light of a movie theatre. Marrying somewhat late in life as fast as she could have done, she found herself isolated once again in a land far away from everyone she knew, closed in a tinned roof house with a man she hardly knows. Occupying herself in her exile, she did all that she could do of knitting, sewing, cooking and meddling with the house boys.

Desperate as she could be, she discharges her miseries and displaces her frustrations and latent anger upon her black servant Moses. The defiant native Moses, who in muted relation dominates her self - inflicted situation, drives the air away from her house and allows her to live only out of breath. Meanwhile he exploits her ignorance, weakness and alienation, though ironically setting her free from her exile and the incomprehensible world.

Doris Lessing manifests sympathy to the white community members who were lured into the promise of quick wealth as they were transplanted into exile. The failure of the dreams and destruction of both soil and soul form the basis of her profound engagement:

In *The Grass is Singing*, Dick Turner's repeated failures as a farmer and Charlie Slatter's success indict the abusive treatment of the African soil and its people that increases wealth but exhausts and destroys life. Failures populate Lessing's African Stories such as ...*The Second Hut* in which ordinary men are undone by the country they hoped to master and profit from.⁷

Doris Lessing has written numerous short stories which according to a number of critics were but rehearsals for her novels. This is testified in *Winter In*

July, a collection of short stories related to life in South Africa during the beginning of the 20th century. We are shown both European and African experiences of exile, alienation, segregation and even estrangement.

Echoing *The Grass is Singing*, *The African Stories* and the collection *Winter In July* are set in farms located on the African veld, isolated from town life by miles and miles away. "In these stories, the protagonists manifest morbid psychological states, mental apathy and sense of loss caused by life in exile, and longing for their homeland 'Britain'".⁸

"The Second Hut" is a short story reflecting Major Carruthers' ordeal of isolation despite sharing life with his wife in the veld. The former soldier settles in the farm leaving behind his country and family in search of peace and wealth. However, through the years he discovers that he was losing his recluse wife who lapsed into illness and even madness as a resort from the stifling loneliness. He was also losing his sons who abandoned Africa and their parents for their homeland. Moreover, he discovered that his life was gradually wasting away on the false promise that things would become better and they could go back to England undefeated by 'Africa'.

In a last attempt to overcome 'Africa' with all its contradictions and challenges he employs an Afrikaner to help him with the cattle and the farm management. Inter-communal relations come to the forefront as he knows that this relation with Van Heerden would lead to its conventional track of hatred, "but they needed each other too badly to nurse old hatreds".⁹

Major Carruther seemed settled for a few weeks, disregarding his wife's silent pleading for going home, as "the fear of having to apply for another loan to his brother"¹⁰ and the possibility of asking for a job in England were pushed away. However, the British Major discovered his manager's family, upon a chance meeting, discerning his dozen children. This raised great fear in him, fear of poverty that might attack him if things didn't turn out right.

On questioning the Dutchman, Carruthers found out that he concealed the presence of his family out of need for work and money. This reminded the Major of his two children and his "perpetual dull ache of worry over them"¹¹ Thus sympathizing with the Afrikaner who was burdened with nine urchins all packed in small hut, the Major broke the rules of African life for a colonist and decided that "it was plain duty to build a second hut beside the first"¹².

However, Van Heerden didn't share Carruthers' violation of the rules as he unconsciously fell under the spell of the African landscape and insisted on treating the natives according to the inherited colonial tradition. Thus his relation with the natives grew worse to the extent that the Major was obliged to supervise the building of the second hut himself. The work was slow and heavy with hatred and tension and upon near completion a spark of aversion was set on the "Second Hut" during the Major's short absence. On the Major's arrival, the second hut was completely destroyed by fire with severe burns inflicted upon the youngest child of this Afrikaner. Despite the Major's endeavours to save the helpless child, he seemed determined to leave his parents. The death of this child was the last straw that initiated Major Carruthers to take the ever-delayed decision of going back home and leave 'Africa' to its inhabitants who could suffice with the African reality.

"Little Tembi" explores a trial of coming to terms with the 'new' country, in an attempt to obliterate estrangement. Jane McCluster, who had been a nurse before marriage, started a clinic on the farm within a month of her arrival. She liked nursing the natives and explained her condescending benevolent feeling candidly: "They are just like children, and appreciated what you do for them"¹³.

The McClusters thought that they were different from other couples who were suffering from exile on their farms, due to the fact that they were abiding by the colonialist white rules. They believed in the myth which emphasized the white 'rescue' of the country and the natives from savagery, and the 'civilizing' influence of the European culture.

As a cheerful content couple, who thought that they were equipped for a useful and enjoyable life, "they would have been delighted if a baby had been born the old-fashioned nine months after marriage"¹⁴. The dream unfulfilled drove Jane to engage herself in some charity task to evade feeling pity to that 'British veld disease', namely, alienation. Supplying health care to the natives in the typical civilizing duty of a white British woman, "she persuaded and lectured giving the women of the compound lessons in cleanliness and baby care"¹⁵. She even set down diet regulations for the workers to keep healthy.

Visited by the desperately sick Little Tembi, a child suffering from 'the hot weather sickness', Jane felt that saving that dying child will offer her a new life of her own. She took care of that child day and night, watching him hardly breathe and when the child became better everyone congratulated her on her work. However, she congratulated herself on the "child she would have"¹⁶. Her care for Tembi was but "a venue for a child that she had yearned for, for two long years"¹⁷.

Jane was then engaged with her own child and having one after the other, she lost track of little Tembi and his whereabouts. But little Tembi couldn't realize that the attention he was granted before by 'The Goodhearted One' was an escape from the curse of alienation and a prayer for a child of her own. His limited instinctive mind directed him to foul deeds to attract the attention of his former benefactress and accept him among her houseboys. Meanwhile, 'The Goodhearted One', as a white woman, reverted to the traditional heritage of 'dealing' with the natives and began to suspect everyone represented by that little Tembi, whose life she granted and was repaid by his petty theft from her house. Though he was promising to be a good garden boy to regain her favour and maintain her attention, she was sure to banish him out of her house and life for the welfare of her own family. But little Tembi couldn't decipher the white woman's codes of living on the African veld and decided to avenge himself on the white woman, who granted him his life but deprived him of living.

News reaching Jane about little Tembi's latest robberies and his imprisonment "effected a sense of relief of her burdensome affiliation even though she proceeded with her life experiencing a remote sense of guilt, an infliction never experienced by white sovereignty"¹⁸. On seeing little Tembi, attempting robbery and seeking shelter in her room, she tried to help him escape the police. She couldn't do for little Tembi anything else than to grant his freedom as he had granted it to her before, releasing her from the dungeons of the horrible prison of loneliness and alienation, by granting her, her first child.

Lessing's series *Children of Violence*, is an exploration of human life and a manifestation of the social self on one side and the "me" on the other side. In *Martha Quest*, the first part of this series, the reader is exposed to life on the African veld with all its contradictions through the eyes of Martha Quest. Martha, the fifteen year old girl, appears to be suffering from the misery "peculiar to the young, that they are going to be cheated by circumstances out of the full life every nerve and instinct is clamouring for"¹⁹. Martha is seen afterwards on her "Quest" journey reinforcing and ushering the "Quest" myth that Doris Lessing herself yearned for. Throughout *Children of Violence* "Martha is aware of the desperate and incompatible elements of her character"²⁰ that alienates her from the society and individualises her character.

Individuation entails separation from a group. This is what the reader discerns through Martha's life quest. She revolts against the traditional oversheltered colonial life on the veld with her parents. She refuses the social circle of young white colonials in the city and breaks off the chains of marriage and children in an attempt to reach her psychological growth among the political groups in Africa. However, all that she gains throughout this life of alienation is a deceptive vision of freedom.

Conclusion

Doris Lessing's work is the work of an exile. As a white South African, she was an outsider to European society; as a socialist, she prohibited herself from re-entering Africa; as a woman, she was left out of a male-dominated culture; as an artist, she was relegated to the outside of the collective of which she and her characters strived so hard to be a part. And her characters were exiles as well. "But the Lessing heroines are not simply vehicles for social criticism; they are not just trumpets for certain cause. They are fully realized works of fiction."²¹. Lessing's contribution was not to any cause, but to literature.

End Notes

1. Carey Kaplan and Cronan Rose Ellen. *Doris Lessing: The Alchemy of Survival*. (USA: Ohio University Press, 1988), 136.
2. *Ibid.*, 137.
3. F. Thomas Staley. ed. *Twentieth Century Women Novelists* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982), 60.
4. Ruth Whittaker. *Macmillan Modern Novelists, Doris Lessing*. (London: The Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1988), 7.
5. *Ibid.* 8
6. Doris Lessing. *The Grass is Singing*. London: Flamingo. (1950), 34.
7. F. Thomas Staley, 62
8. Mona Knapp. *Doris Lessing*. New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co. (1984), 39.
9. "The Second Hut", 11
10. *Ibid.*, 13.
11. *Ibid.*, 16.
12. *Ibid.*, 17
13. "Little Tembi", 72.
14. *Ibid.*, 73.
15. *Ibid.*, 73
16. *Ibid.*, 76
17. Mona Knapp, 46

18. Lillians Robinson. Ed. *Modern Women Writers*. Vol.2 New York: Continuum Publishing Co.(1996), 54.
19. *Martha Quest*, 13.
20. Lillians Robinson. 55.
21. F. Thomas Staley, 60

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