

## DORIS LESSING'S «PASSAGE» TO ENGLAND

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It is the aim of this paper to consider some of the social and biographical aspects that form the background to Doris Lessing's literary career. Her political commitment, her rejection of academicism and conventional education, the constant shifts of her fiction, appear less confusing when we read about Lessing's experience in Africa, a long period of her life which we have chosen to call her «passage» to England.

Doris Lessing arrived in England, from South Africa, in 1949. This year is an important landmark in her novelistic career since she was able to fulfil her desire of becoming a writer. Her first novel *The Grass Is Singing*, which she had written in Africa, was published in 1950. The book was a success of acceptance and criticism; something quite amazing for a woman writer —especially given the subject-matter of the novel.

But what had happened before that? Who was this woman coming from a British colony who dared to take such a tough stand against British colonialism and the morals of white civilization?

Answers to these questions can be traced in her following novels, especially the *Children of Violence* series (1952-1969), which provide a rich biographical source as well as a moral portrait of western civilization and a historical document of pre- and post-Second World War life in white dominated Southern Rhodesia.

Doris Lessing brought her African experience and African writing to London at a timely moment. The African question was

emerging and the 1950s were to be a period of violent transition throughout the African continent. The African works that Lessing published during that decade constitute some of the most telling literary portents of that change. *The Grass Is Singing* was soon acclaimed as the most promising novel since the second World War and certainly it was «the most successful colonial novel since [Olive Schreiner's] *The Story of an African Farm*, which surprised London in 1883.»<sup>1</sup> But *The Grass Is Singing* was not merely a political novel. It does not deal with ideologies or make angry avowals of the author's distaste for white racism or of her support for African self-determination. Lessing makes her subject-matter explicit enough through her characterization of the white settlers, both in her novel and in her stories. Her method is to present relationships and an episode and allow readers the liberty of their own interpretation.

As Martin Green acutely points out, Doris Lessing arrived in England at a time when «the imperial country began to shrink and wither, to feel poor and cramped».<sup>2</sup> Her arrival coincided with that of thousands of immigrants from the decaying Empire. These were of two kinds, different in number and in the influence they were going to exert on the country of reception. Lessing belonged by birth to the white colonists who would soon disappear into the national scenery. But there were many non-white colonized immigrants, who stood out against the national scenery, as dramatically different, and were «allowed» to drift into the ghettos and into drudgery. D. Lessing's fiction drew authority over the general reader by representing both groups. Immigrants from the West Indies, from India, from Pakistan, and the ex-colonies of Africa, began arriving in England very soon after the war ended, and inevitably brought with them a new range of cultural problems. The coloured immigrants came to replace, in many respects, the native working-class as an embodied reproach to the privileged. It is towards such a conscience that Lessing's early novels are directed.

Doris Lessing's arrival in London in 1949 fits the pattern set out by other Empire-born white women writers who had «broken free» and headed towards the capital. For London was recognised as the centre of literary England.<sup>3</sup> But Lessing soon made a reputation for herself as a radical writer. She spoke for the women's movement, for the oppressed, the colonized and the revolutionaries. Indeed, she didn't live within literary London, but among the political exiles from East Europe, from McCarthy's America and ex-colonial states. What her writing represented was the experience of colonial

life seen from the inside, but she also analysed the struggle of the individual in a decadent society.

The place and date of birth of Doris Lessing (Kermansha, Persia, 1919) have a clear historical connotation. They speak of the history of the British Empire. Her father, Alfred Tayler, had fought in the First World War («the great unmentionable»). Persia was, in those years, a British protectorate and Mr. Tayler worked as a clerk at the Imperial Bank of Persia. Those were times, as Lessing recalls, of intense social life which Mrs. Tayler would strongly miss during her years in Africa. Doris Lessing has described her parents in her writings, most remarkably in the *Children of Violence* series, and these portraits have a character of being historical clichés, both psychologically and sociologically. Both the father and mother were thoroughly English and representative of their period. He, a dreamily humorous imperialist, shy and passionate, steeped in the colonial myth of finding adventure and riches in the uncultivated virgin land. She, the polly but anxious school-girlish matron.

In 1925 the Taylers were home in England on leave, and were so attracted by the image of Rhodesia offered by the Imperial Exhibition that they decided to buy a farm there. It had been made possible for white (mostly British) settlers to acquire huge farms on easy terms from the Colonial Government; the Government having previously ejected the Africans from their land and crowded them into reserves. The going price was ten shillings an acre and Alfred Tayler took up 300 acres (actually a comparatively modest spread). According to the myths of the colonial adventure, the farm would provide the opportunity of earning easy money and an independent life, with the prospect of an early retirement in the English countryside, a comfortable and respectable social position and the possibility of securing a future for their children. To this, in 1925, Mr. Tayler took his family, his daughter, her brother (two years younger than Doris), and the woman who had nursed him when he was seriously wounded in the war and whom he had afterwards married. D. Lessing describes, not without irony, the event which changed the course of her family life and her own future:

*...on an impulse, turning his back forever on England, washing his hands of the corruption of the East, my father collected all his capital, £800, I think, while my mother packed curtains from Liberty's, clothes from Harrod's, visiting cards, a piano, Persian rugs, a governess and two small children.<sup>4</sup>*

Unfortunately, the experience did not correspond to the myths, and the farm did not produce the expected returns. The story is fictionalized with detail in *Martha Quest* (1952). Like her heroine Martha, Doris Lessing grew up on an isolated farm between the admiration towards an eccentric father and the irritability produced by her mother, of whom she admired her physical and moral strength. Ironically, the social isolation that so much tormented Mrs. Tayler was a blessing for the children, who grew up in close contact with the African wilderness: «solitude the most precious of gifts... but our mother lay awake at night, ill with grief because her children were deprived, because they were not good middle-class children in some London suburb.»<sup>5</sup>

But in spite of her deep love of the freedom of the farm and her close contact with nature, Doris decided to rebel against her mother's plans for her. Like *Martha Quest*, she left the family home at fifteen, after having rejected a conventional education at a convent school in Salisbury, the colonial capital of Rhodesia. Growing up on the lonely farm on the high veld between the wars, Doris Lessing had little racial consciousness and only a slowly dawning understanding of the true relations between her people and the blacks. But she had the freedom and space to live that largely solitary childhood which makes for introspection, dreaming, a closeness with the natural environment, and a freedom from early intellectual involvement. Similar stories seem to complete the biographical background of many colonial women. Writers like Olive Schreiner, Elspeth Huxley, Jean Rhys or Katherine Mansfield, and Lessing herself, educated themselves through an intense reading of English literature and the classics, and at some moment in their lives started off for England, the «home country»; the «promised land».

Although D. Lessing spent 25 years of her life in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), her mind was always on England. «I can't remember a time when I didn't want to come to England. England was for me a grail.» But the word «farm» meant, even for her, something different from what she saw about her; «farm» meant small green fields in England, not the African veld. The English words never seemed to fit the experience of the colonists, and this discrepancy has been a motif of English writing since 1945. This is often humorous, though not without an underlying guilt about the cultural superiority implied. But Lessing, typically, takes seriously both this motif and all the other incongruities of frontier experience.

Lessing was a difficult child —as she herself confesses in her autobiographical writing— and her novels of the *Children of Violence* series bear witness to that. Like Martha Quest in the first volumes of the series, Lessing left the farm at an early age and went to work in the capital (first as an «au pair», and then as an operator at the Central Telephone Exchange). This was shortly before the Second World War broke out. She found herself in an ingrown, intensely race-and-class conscious colonial society. At first, if we continue reading some general autobiographical elements in her portrayal of Martha Quest, she moved with the stream: first a frenetic good time, then a «proper marriage» to a colonial civil servant. When she left her first husband (Frank Wisdom, Douglas Knowell in the series), she had to abandon her two children by him. From her second marriage —to a German refugee from Hitler's Europe, Gottfried Lessing— she kept the custody of her son, Peter, whom she educated and brought to England with her.

The Second World War precipitated alien influences into the white settler society of Southern Rhodesia and disturbed its ingrown conservatism. Most important for D. Lessing herself were the contacts it brought with the young Englishmen serving in the R.A.F. bases there. They brought with them what was then the fresh Marxist idealism of the 'thirties, and soon formed a Communist group, in which there were no distinctions of race. Lessing joined it with enthusiasm:

*«there was a time in my life when I was a member of a communist group which was pure —they had no contact with any kind of reality. It must have been blessed by Lenin from his grave, it was so pure... enormously idealistic and mostly extremely intellectual people created a communist party in a vacuum which no existing communist party anywhere in the world would have recognised as such.»<sup>6</sup>*

The English servicemen who formed this group were a completely new element in the claustrophobic Rhodesian society; men quite untouched by the attitudes typical of an outnumbered «superior race». Gottfried Lessing (like Anton Hesse) was among the newcomers; a central figure in the leftist group for which D. Lessing worked intensely in those years. Lessing's involvement in leftist politics continued for some time after she left Rhodesia and provides a major theme in the *Children of Violence* series from the second book onwards. Though she did join the British Communist

party, it would be a mistake to interpret that as a strong commitment. She only joined three years after her arrival in England and left it in 1956. Nor did she leave, as many did, simply out of revulsion at the Russian invasion of Hungary: she certainly expresses her dissatisfaction with the Party, and at any rate, it is impossible to imagine so open-minded and creative a writer fitting herself readily into any party's shufflings and compromises.

Doris Lessing had to wait for the proceedings of her divorce from her second husband to be over, in order to be able to leave Southern Rhodesia and go to England. Her arrival in London—where she has lived ever since—meant the end of one period in her life, certainly the most decisive one from the point of view of her literary production. She left behind the myths of the Empire and the history of the colonial adventure. Similarly, we can see Martha Quest, in the fourth volume of the series, preparing herself for that journey which will take her away from the oppressive life of the British colony. Images of dust, vacuity, emptiness, dryness and death permeate the fourth novel, *Landlocked*, mirroring the depressing aftermath of the Second World War. Lessing says of this time: [they were] «the worst years of my life». While she is awaiting a «passage» that will free her and take her to the «promised land», Martha has recurrent dreams in which water is the central element: the sea that will free her from the oppressive atmosphere of the colony. But the sea also encloses and isolates, it is not a convincing element of liberation.

Lessing was equally trapped («landlocked») in a country where cultural stagnation and political blindness were obstacles that a free spirit had to overcome. The idea of leaving Africa is always present in Martha, the feeling of «passage» is strongly felt in the novels of the *Children of Violence* series. It is depicted in the constant impermanence that characterizes Martha Quest's life; she is always on her way outleaving school, leaving her parents, the farm for the city; her marriage and daughter for political commitment; Africa for England.

A feeling of instability also pervades the series from beginning to end. It becomes manifest in Martha's swinging moods, in her constant errors of choice; in the fragility of her hectic life in the Sports Club; in her stubborn self-denial for comfort and security. This feeling of impermanence works as a metaphor of the decadence of British power in the world, emphasizing the shallowness of moral values in the white settler society; and it also mirrors the

writer's own process of life in Rhodesia, preparing herself, as she was all the time, for her departure; for exile.

In the same way too, the last novel of the series (*The Four-Gated City* [1969]), is full of scattered fragments about and characters from the colony that Martha takes with her to England. Lessing does not close the door to her African experience, but she fictionalizes the myths of the Empire. Following the pattern of the history of the British Empire, Lessing «emigrates» to England and «lands» in a city, mirror of the country's soul: a landscape full of ruins, sadness and destruction welcomes Martha Quest in her first days in London. For Lessing this means the proof of the decadence of the Empire, and the destruction of the myths that went with it.

Nevertheless, in England, in London, Lessing found a place where she could free herself from the social and moral responsibilities that so strongly oppressed her in Southern Rhodesia; an atmosphere where she could expand her creative impulse. In the 1950s and early sixties, her relationship with the political intelligentsia and the strong social commitment shown in her books, led many critics into interpreting her work strictly from the viewpoint of her political involvement. The fact that Lessing showed in her first novels a deep knowledge of political and social realities and a deep insight into white and black issues alike, gave her a strength far beyond the reach of her best-known forerunners amongst critics of «apartheid».

Though the colour problem is an inevitable theme in her work, Lessing had no more wished her writing to be tied to that than to Marxist ideology. It is an open-eyed understanding of humanity, across the lines of colour, society and place, which has from the beginning rendered her African writings at one and the same time intensely African and yet the source of a wider insight into the general human condition. Inevitably, this breadth of hers —not just the fact of «exile»— was bound to lead Lessing beyond purely African subject-matter.

Since 1969, Africa has seemingly disappeared from her sources of creativity. Yet the African influence is more than a theme, it is a setting, a landscape —external or internal— a pulse, a tone of narrative voice, a colour, that the Lessing reader can easily identify, or feel. It is most evident in the recurrence in her novels of the motif of the ideal city which Martha Quest envisioned in the first volume of the series, and which the author so passionately clings to;

*The yellow flanks of Africa lie beneath the moving insect-like plane, black-manea with forest, twitching in the heat  
A magnificent country, with all its riches in the future.  
Because it is so empty we can dream. We can dream of cities  
and civilization more beautiful than anything that has been  
seen in the world before.<sup>7</sup>*

#### NOTAS

1. Michael Thorpe, *Doris Lessing's Africa* (London: Evans Brothers, 1978), p. 11.
2. Martin Green, *The English Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 168.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
4. Doris Lessing, «My Father», in: *The Small Personal Voice*, ed. Paul Schleuter (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 90.
5. Doris Lessing, «My Mother» («Autobiography» [Part Two]), *Granta*, 17, Autum, 1985, p. 227.
6. Doris Lessing, «Interview», by Florence Howe, *The Nation*, 204, 6 March 1967, pp. 311-13.
7. Doris Lessing, *Going Home* (London: Panther, 1968), p. 13.