

CHAPTER - IV
THE SHORT NOVELS

This chapter comprises of four short novels written by Doris Lessing which are included in the two volumes of Collected African Stories under study:

Eldorado

A Home for the Highland Cattle

Hunger

The Antheap

'Eldorado' is one of Lessing's most painful treatments of a family relationship. Alec Barnes comes searching for farm and chooses the rich maize-soil though cleverer, experienced men tell him that the big money is to be found in tobacco. He takes two thousand acres from a man who has gone bankrupt. He increases acreage for farming by cutting down trees and a time comes when the farm goes bare. The experts also tell him that he is spoiling his land by his way of farming but Alec continues farming according to his own style.

*Distance — that was what he needed. It was what he had left England to find.
... Alec's instinct was for space ...¹*

Maggie Barnes accepts her husband's choice though sometimes she dislikes his way of living. But she is quite hopeful about her son, Paul. She reflects that he must be an engineer, lawyer or prestigious man in future. The Old wandering prospector who comes to the Barneses' farm who

speaks of the search for gold as a scientist might of a discovery, or an artist of his art. Since Alec finds no hope in farming, he starts searching for gold and this makes him to neglect his farm. She tries to warn her son, Paul against this lyre:

... She would leave all that to Alec and see that her son became a respectable lawyer, or a bridge-builder. That was enough adventure for her.²

... this was how the vision narrowed in her; all the rich potentialities of Africa she saw through her son, ... Education, that was the point.³

Of course, he does not understand. He oscillates uneasily between his parent's two worlds, condemned by love, shame, antagonism and the sheer necessity of close relationship to seek his own standing point apart from both.

Opposed to the father's self-centred vision of 'freedom' is that which the mother desires for her son: 'Knowledge freed a man; and to that belief she clung, because it was her nature; and she was to grieve all her life because such a simple and obvious truth was not simple for Paul.'⁴ Knowing he hasn't the academic ability, and looking for a solid form of security in reaction to his father's failure, Paul drift into a world of fantasy. Alec wastes money on prospecting for gold because of his superstitions. On one occasion, Paul

fights with him saying that he is wasting a lot of money on useless thing like prospecting. Maggie, trapped between her love for son and her husband; decides to support her husband against her son. Paul turns to James, the rough and ready 'small-worker' whose mine lies on the farm's boundary. Maggie tells Paul to take interest in farming but as farming is strange for him; Paul goes to Alec for advice and guidance who does not cooperate with him. Throwing in his lot with James, Paul fulfils Maggie's worst fears, that he would 'grow up lax and happy-go-lucky, like a Colonial.' Because of her husband and the son she feels that 'the very country was against her.' The woman, with her dreams of order, security, a civilized life, knows that her unbeatable antagonist is Africa. To it in 'Eldorado,' Maggie loses both her men: Paul, the son, will loot that earth; her husband Alec scarcely sane, will be bound for the rest of his life to its charms.

As James' mine is exhausted, Paul wanders with him prospecting for gold. They cannot find gold in neighbouring farm so one day they enter into the boundary of Alec's farm. There they find reef. They send samples for confirmation to the Government department; and when it is confirmed they decide to bring machinery in it. Maggie dare not to say Alec about Paul that his son has found a reef. Alec tries for number of years in

prospecting without any success but within some weeks Paul finds a reef. When machinery comes, at that time, Maggie tells Alec about it, and also tells him that Paul will be a partner in the mine. Faithful to the gold that eludes Alec but gives itself, indifferently, to his son, it is enough for him that it exists. All he says proudly:

'Well, that proves it. I told you, didn't I? I always told you so.'⁵

Herein, again, Lessing is depicting a conflicting situation of the Settler's life. Eventhough elders like Alec Barnes fail in surviving as a successful settler, there is some ray hope deposited in the efforts of the younger ones like Paul who succeed in fulfilling their dreams.

'A Home for the Highland Cattle' is an ironic comedy. When the new commers emigrate, they emigrate to have a nice house, or a flat, with may be a bit of garden. Marina Giles leaves England with her husband in just this frame of mind:

It seems, from books, that the colonizers and adventurers went sailing off to a new life, a new country, opportunities, and so forth. Now all they want is a roof over their heads.⁶

In the city, the truth is that, there are not ten thousand whites and serviced by 150,000 blacks who 'do not so much live here, as squeeze themselves in as they can.'⁷ The

Gileses get a flat for the three months in 138, Cecil John Rhodes Vista in the main suburban area of the city. Marina Giles who is liberal-minded has her vision:

... of herself and Philip living in a group of amiable people pleasantly interested in the arts, who read the New Statesman week by week, and held that discreditable phenomena like the colour bar and the black-white struggle could be solved by sufficient goodwill ... a delightful picture.⁸

Like countless colonial wives before her, she is confounded by the 'servant problem.' This story exploits this problem with more comic possibilities, though the effects are nonetheless serious. Marina treats her servant, Charlie with goodwill. She gives increase in wages and supplies him vegetables and meat. Afterwards Marina thinks in different way, she dreams of a fine house. The fluctuations experienced by the colonisers between dream and reality, finally resulting in frustration, is ironically brought out when Marina Giles hopes:

... for some miracle that would provide her ... with a nice house, a garden, and the other vanishing amenities of life. They would buy one of those suburban houses and she would have a baby. She would have several babies. ... Ah, what had she not expected!⁹

This story has a comic symbol — one of Victorian pictures of highland cattle. Mrs. Skinner, the landlady,

leaves it to Marina's safe-keeping. It is the persistent image of what she had intended to escape. On the other hand, Charlie seems to admire it. An admiration is connected with the part played by cattle in tribal life 'that could only be described as religious',¹⁰ Her attempt to get Charlie married to Theresa, his pregnant girl friend, brings the picture into focus. Thinking it valuable Charlie has the bright idea of presenting the picture to Theresa's father as lobola. Marina agrees to give it to him. She and Philip drive Charlie and Theresa alongwith the picture to Theresa's father at the wretched location. Theresa's father talks about the old custom of lobola. For him the cattle is a symbol -

... Which were not to be thought of in terms of money, of simply buying a woman - not at all. They meant so much: as a sign of good feeling, a token of union between the clans, and earnest that the woman would be looked after, an acknowledgement that she was someone very precious, whose departure would impoverish her family — the cattle were all these things, and many more.¹¹

He accepts the picture. Philip and Marina drive back, grim but little wiser, unknowingly leaving the couple to celebrate their union in an illicit liquor den. When Mrs. Skinner returns and sees what those 'white kaffirs' (the Gileses) have done with her precious paintings,

she gets Charlie arrested for carrying off a few worthless objects including 'a wooden door-knocker that said "Welcome Friend".'

Later Marina comes across a file of handcuffed prisoners in a street in this city of what used to be known as 'The Dark Continent.' She is there in a shop to buy a table for her new house. She recognizes Charlie from the file and the girl behind, Theresa. She thinks of seeing them but when she remembers seeing things; she goes into the shop to buy her table. Her well-intentioned but amateurish meddling has merely violated the accepted order of things, causing both Charlie's misfortune and her tired indifference. Lessing ironically exposes the perils of liberal efforts at 'connexion.' It is a cautionary tale whose meaning can be applied to many situations other than the one that directly inspired it: claims to enlightened altitudes are far more easily professed than lived up to.¹²

Lessing depicts, here once again, the colonial community through characters like Mr. Black, Mrs. Skinner, etc. Mr. Black represents successful aspect of colonialism in South Africa as he says to Marina:

'... in this country we are all equal (among the whites, that is — that goes without saying) and I'll fight the first person who suggests anything to the contrary.' Democracy, as it were, with one eye on the audience.

But alas, he was still a clerk, and felt it, and if there was one class of person he detested it was the civil servant; and if there was another, it was the person new from 'Home.'¹³

As a Civil servant's wife newly arrived from England, Marina Giles finds herself on the outside of three groups; non-Civil Service employees, long-time colonials and Africans. When she says to Mrs. Pond that her husband is in the Civil Service, she does not understand the 'sceptical smile.' She also does not understand the class-conscious resentment in Mrs. Pond's remark: 'You have to be in the service to get what's going.' She discovers her alien position as a liberal when Mrs. Skinner, another coloniser, gives her advice;

'You must keep an eye on Charlie, ... He never does a stroke more than he has to. He's bred bone lazy. You'd better keep an eye on the food too. He steals. I had to have the police to him only last month, when I lost my garnet brooch. Of course he swore he hadn't taken it, but I've never laid my hands on it since. My husband gave him a good hiding, ...'

'They're all born thieves and liars. You shouldn't trust them farther than you can kick them. ...'¹⁴

The new colonials like the Gileses may be the bearers of more enlightened ideas, they nevertheless have hardly

less interest than the rural settler in maintaining their ascendancy over the blacks. An irony exists in this contradiction.

'Hunger' reveals the life of the underworld. Lessing wrote this short-novel with good intentions. The idea of writing this novel came in the mind when she visited Moscow. She writes in her preface:

'Why, then, could I not write a story of simple good and bad, with clear-cut choices, set in Africa? The plot? Only one possible plot — that a poor black boy or girl should come from a village to the white man's rich town and ... there he would encounter, as occurs in life, good and bad, and after much trouble and many tears he would follow the path of ...

I tried, but it failed. It wasn't true. Sometimes one writes things that don't come off, and feels more affectionate towards them than towards those that worked.¹⁵

Lessing's failure in 'Hunger' is one of good intentions for she wants to convey her message overmastering the story-telling function. Jabavu does not work with his father and mother. He has a dream that he will enjoy city life and live like white people in the town. He is always 'hungry' so he is called the Big Mouth. His mother thinks.

... it is as if inside Jabavu ... some kind of hungry animal is living ... who will

*certainly one day run off to the white man's town and become one of the mastotis, the criminal youth.*¹⁶

Jabavu learns to read by himself, he takes the paper off parcels of things he has bought from the Greek store and reads them. His mother's suspicion comes true when Jabavu leaves the village with his brother Pavu with only a shilling that is given to him by his mother. They come across the smart fellow who offers them job but when Jabavu denies his offer to work, he threatens him to call policeman. Then he butts his head into the fellow's stomach and runs away into bush. When Jabavu falls asleep, his brother runs away. He decides to go alone thinking:

*... Jabavu, is afraid of nothing.
...I am Jabavu, who is too clever for the tricks
of bad white men and bad black men.*¹⁷

He later meets Mr. Samu, the African politician, who gives him the address of his friend, Mr. Mizi. Jabavu reaches in the city and steals loaves of bread and bun; and then some clothes. A policeman asks him where has he got those clothes and where he lives? He butts his head into the policeman's stomach and runs away. He gets a pass to work in the city. He thinks to go to Mr. Mizi; but he comes across Betty. He does not want to go to the camp run by the Native Commissioner, so Betty takes him to her room; where he meets Mrs. Kambusi

who runs a shebeen. She tells him about some grim realities of city-life:

In the villages we may enter and greet our brothers, and take hospitality from them by right of blood and kinship. This is not the case here, and every man is a stranger until he has proved himself a friend ...

It is probable like most boys who come newly to the city you have many fine ideas about the life, and what you will do. Yet it is a hard life, much harder than you now know.¹⁸

She also makes him alert against Betty:

... many thousands of our people enter this city and know nothing of either the men of light or the men of darkness - for whom this very bad girl sitting here works ... you are a fool if you do not leave this girl and go immediately to the house whose number you know.¹⁹

But Betty captures him by giving him sexual offer. She finds him useful because she is a member of one of the underworld gangs. She is nothing but a prostitute. But he leaves her and goes in search of a job. Then he comes across another girl, Alice who gives him company and place to sleep in.

Next Saturday, he comes to the Recreation Hall where he sees Mr. Samu and Mr. Mizi. There is meeting

going on and he also speaks before the people, the man of light. But 'he does not know whether they commend a rich man with smart clothes or a man of light with knowledge and a strong persuasive voice.'²⁰ Then he runs away from the window. For his misfortune, Jerry finds him and tries to convince him that how the Samus and the Mizis are bad people. Thus the process of Jabavu's merging in the underworld gang begins. Jerry behaves with him as if he is his friend; takes him to the film show; and by now 'Jabavu has forgotten that part of himself that wishes to become like Mr. Mizi and Mrs. Mizi's son.'²¹ Jerry takes him to the market and steals things and Jabavu comes to know that he is now one of the gang, that Jerry is his leader, that Betty is his woman. After some days an idea comes in Jerry's mind that Jabavu may be a challenge to himself after some day. Betty is always with Jabavu who thinks that he should kill Jerry and become the leader of gang. Jerry decides to get rid of him by playing tricks with him. But he fails. At least he kills Betty and tells others that Jabavu has killed Betty. Jerry has a plan, now, stealing money from Mr. Mizi and running away with it. But when they go there Jabavu does not want to steal money so calls the Mizis; Jerry slips from the window and Jabavu is caught with a knife in his hand. He is handed over to the police and imprisoned. In prison he gets a letter from Mr. Mizi. He addresses Jabavu saying 'we' in which he finds feeling of brotherhood.

Again in this short novel Lessing explicates the theme of colonialism in a very emphatic manner. When Jabavu sees Mr. Samu, on his way to city he hears Mr. Samu speaking about the white man using an image of locusts:

The white man has settled like a locust over Africa, and, like the locusts in early morning, cannot take flight for the heaviness of the dew on their wings. But the dew that weight the white man is the money that he makes from our labour ... their lives are built on our work, and yet every day and every hour of every day they insult us, call us pigs and kaffirs or children, lazy, stupid, and ignorant ... every day the white people grow more rich and the black more poor.²²

Mrs. Kambusi, like Mr. Samu, is against the colonisers and their way of ruling the country. While talking about the drink, Mrs. Kambusi tells Jabavu that:

Clever people make this poison for fools to drink.²³

The corruption in the city is narrated by an incident of giving the policeman a pound in order to neglect Mrs. Kambusi's illegal supply of drinks like skokian in her shebeen. The coloured man gives Jabavu a note saying he wishes to employ him as a cook, and writes his name in Jabavu's situpa when Jerry makes bargaining and settles

to give him bribe of a pound. Sometimes the underworld gangs use women to keep the policeman quiet. Lessing, thus, critically highlights the problem of corruption in the city life.

Influence of Lessing's visit to Moscow as a communist politician can be found in the last page, when imprisoned Jabavu gets fired with a revived sense of the old tribal solidarity after reading the letter from the African leader, Mr. Mizi. It is the fact that it is Mr. Mizi's message which touches Jabavu, not Mr. Tennent's, 'the man of God':

'We, says Jabavu over and over again,
We. And it is as if in his empty hands
are the warm hands of brothers.²⁴

'The Antheap' poignantly develops the antithesis of white and black, and postulates a synthesis of the two forces symbolized by a half-caste child. The story is again supported by a triangle, consisting of the white boy, Tommy; the miner, Mr. Macintosh who embodies exploitative white supremacy; and Dirk, his unacknowledged child by a native woman. Tommy recognizes that Dirk deserves an education, which he is determined to ensure even at the expense of his own schooling. Tommy, whose youthful sense of justice is yet intact, respects the natural superiority of the Africans. This is symbolized by his carved likeness of Dirk's black mother. He chooses the hardest indigenous wood available, that of the thorn

tree, which immediately blunts his knife:

It was not pale and gleaming like almonds, as was the softer wood. It was a gingery brown, a close-fibred, knotted wood, and down its centre, as he knew, was a hard black spine.²⁵

His first likeness of Dirk is modelled of clay: a substance infinitely more malleable than the hardwood representing the older generation. The clay represents the strength of the African soil itself. Some years later, Tommy carves a second statue of his friend from a tree trunk which he leaves rooted — indeed the roots, a symbol of Dirk's inviolable bond with the African continent, provide the focal point of the carving. Tommy's aesthetic vision is undaunted by Macintosh's argument that the roots are rotten and will be devoured by ants in any event.

Not surprisingly, it is by violence, again in the form of fire, that Macintosh hopes to foil Tommy's secret education of his friend. He burns down the hide out in which Dirk has hidden and studied Tommy's smuggled schoolbooks. Though eventually he capitulates and agrees to send Dirk to the university, he does so not for the sake of Dirk's talents but because he is afraid of losing the white boy, who is dear to him. His loyalty to the white collective is unshakable - accordingly, he does not attain a more mature vision, but instead is 'defeated by something he did not begin to understand.'

The problem of communication between Tommy, Dirk and Macintosh, who are repeatedly barred from mutual understanding by conflicting emotions that run deep and strong, and by sheer incapacity to enter fully into the thoughts and feelings of the others is solved by the casting of Tommy as an artist. His art expresses more than he can say or consciously know. It communicates this knowledge to the others, who, like him, are locked in pride, hatred and distrust. It is natural that Tommy Clarke, the solitary white boy, should turn to the nearest children for playmates even though they are 'kaffirs.' As Tommy's mother does not like Tommy playing with African children, she warns:

You're too big now to play with a lot of dirty kaffirs. When you were little it was different, but now you're a big boy.²⁶

It is natural, too, that the one to whom he feels closest should be the half-caste Dirk, the boss's unacknowledged son: the coloured is the one against whom the barrier of 'silence' and segregation is strongest. When Tommy asks Dirk whether he dances with black; Dirk says:

... White people don't like us half-castes. Neither do the blacks like us. No one does. And so I don't dance with them.²⁷

This very difficulty naturally spurs Tommy's attempts to breach it, rather than any precocious instinct for equality — that comes later, after the personal relationship has been established. He asks, 'Why shouldn't I play with Mr. Macintosh's son?' The story never drops, throughout the slow progress of the relationship and of Tommy's insight, into simple heroics. With great wisdom Lessing analyses the feeling that holds the two boys together, supplying the perception of what Tommy only dimly comprehends. When Macintosh gives in and concedes chances of education to both the boys, making them as equal as their society will allow, a new phase in their lives inevitably begins, to surmount the barrier that may yet break them; it remains an open question whether they can or will:

Their victory was entirely theirs, but now they had to begin again, in the long and difficult struggle to understand what they had won and how they would use it.²⁸

Only in this last sentence does the novel take the clearer-cut form of parable and do we suddenly see the boys as more than themselves, as the symbols of promise for the future or failure.²⁹

Thus Tommy challenges the racist assumptions of the dominant adults. Most of the settlers who come to Africa have racial prejudice. Their assumption is that:

'The native doesn't understand good treatment, he only appreciates the whip, ...'³⁰

And with the help of this principle, they think, they will be successful like Macintosh. But Macintosh sets fire to the hut where Dirk learns with Tommy for he does not like it. Dirk reacts very angrily to this act:

'When I grow up I'll clear you all out, all of you, there won't be one white man left in Africa, not one.'³¹

Macintosh, who is unambiguously presented as thoroughly exploitative, is not challenged by Tommy's parents but by the children. ^{Thus} the boys succeed in forcing a change of parameters for themselves and a change in behaviour on the part of the adults.

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