

CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing (1919-) is one of the most powerful and significant novelists to have emerged on the international literary scene in the last four decades. As is the case with many great novelists, Mrs. Lessing's life is intimately linked with her art and her total novelistic development and development as a short-story writer. Born of British parents in Persia, now Iran, in 1919, Lessing's childhood was characterised by mobility and a variety of experiences. Her family moved to what was then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, to take up farming in a small town of Banket. Within her family, Doris was a 'rebel in residence.' She had a very unhappy childhood because of her parents' psychological and financial struggles. She had no formal education after the age of fourteen. As a result, her exposure to knowledge entirely consisted of independent extensive reading of books ranging from Balzac, Stendhal, Dostoevsky to Havelock Ellis. As she herself commented later, 'I read these classics; it was my education.' Formal education was replaced by her keen observations of highly charged racial, political and social situations of the South African society.

During the Second World War, Lessing became increasingly interested in Politics. She joined a small Marxist group in Salisbury where she met a half-Jewish

German refugee called Gottfried Lessing, whom she married in 1945 only to get divorced in 1949. In 1949 she came to London with the manuscript of her first novel, The Grass is Singing which was published in 1950. Since then she has been writing novels and short-stories endlessly. She has so far written nineteen novels, sixty-five short-stories, five plays, three extended auto-biographical narratives and at least fifty substantial journalistic articles.

Lessing has been honoured for her contribution to the body of contemporary English fiction both in thematic and formal innovations. She won the Somerset Maugham Award of the Society of Authors for Five in 1954, became the first British novelist to win the French prize, The Prix Medici for literature in 1976, got the Australian State prize for European literature in 1982, received the Shakespeare prize of the West German Hamburger Stiftung in 1982, was given the W. H. Smith Literary Award in 1986 for her novel, The Good Terrorist. She has received honorary memberships of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1974; the Institute for Cultural Research, and the Modern Language Association (U.S.A.), 1974.

II

So far Lessing has been appreciated as one of the leading woman novelists by many critics. In comparison

to the body of criticism of her novels, her African short-stories still remain neglected. Her African stories have been reviewed by critics like C. J. Driver: "The African-ness Holds these Stories Together," Anthony Channells: "Doris Lessing and Rhodesian Settler Novel," Murray Steele: "Doris Lessing's Rhodesia," Patricia Chaffee: "Spatial Patterns and Closed Groups in Lessing's African Stories" and Margaret Daymod: "Areas of the Mind: Continuity and Change in The Memoirs of a Survivor and Lessing's African Stories." Thus taking into account that there has not been any single full-length study of her short-stories, either in a book form or scholarly dissertation, the present dissertation honestly tries to fill up this lacuna.

The critics mentioned above have tried in their articles to focus upon some issues that Doris Lessing has dealt with in her African short-stories. The issues that figure in these stories include: colonialism, racialism and conflicting relationship between coloniser and colonized against the vast African background. the?

III

Colonialism: Lessing's views could be best expressed with reference to Frantz Fanon's classic of anti-colonialism entitled The Wretched of the Earth, where he says:

Europe has multiplied divisions and opposing groups, has fashioned classes and sometimes even racial prejudices, and has endeavoured by every means to bring about and intensify the stratification of colonised society ... These differences are born of colonial history, in other words of oppression.¹

Lessing also speaks about colonialism in her introduction to her African Stories:

When the white man arrived (in South Africa), they saw themselves as civilizers. They knew nothing about the people they conquered. ... What they knew was put to their own uses. For instance, the men recruiting black labour for the mines took a look at the old custom that a girl would not marry a young man who had not proved himself in war or in hunt; and then substituted for it the idea that a young man who had not worked in the mines was a 'mampora,' a fool - he had not proved himself a man- (something very useful to the mine-owners).²

The concept of colonialism is thus important in Lessing's creative writings. It applies not only to the African settings of her short-stories and of some of her novels but also the very mode of her perception. For her there are two Africas: the country which has always belonged to African, and the power the white colonial has imposed upon it. She belongs to neither in any real sense, and it is this marginality which enables her to act as an observer, and gives an additional clarity to

that detachment which is an essential prerequisite of the artist. In one of her interviews Lessing~~f~~ says: 'South Africa is a fascist paradise.'³ Lessing is thus concerned not only with the politics of colonialism but also with its ethics and ontology.

All the stories under study are charged with the spirit of colonialism in which Africans are robbed off their body, spirit and land.

IV

Racialism: In *Going Home* the political and moral content is explicit in her analysis of apartheid, its foundation in neurosis and its reinforcement in economics. Despite efforts to convince her that Partnership and Federation are satisfactory move~~f~~ towards racial integration, Lessing states categorically that what both are doing 'is to give a few privileges, raising the standards of a minority of Africans above their fellows without altering the basic structure of segregation.'⁴

Although poverty has slowly eroded the differences between black and white people, a distinction always remains, perpetuated by the Charlie Slatters of the world, who obey the first law of Africa, that 'thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point, because if you do, the nigger will see that he is as good as you are.'⁵ It is this climate of oppression that

elicits Lessing's warcry in the final footnote to Going Home. 'The individual democracy, liberty - I am concerned with these more than anything.'⁶ For her the realities of Southern Rhodesia are 'rooted in geography,' in the scorching heat of a tropical sun, the vast spaces of the veld, the isolation of the continent and its people, rooted in the beautiful distruction extremes of Southern Rhodesia itself. As Doris Lessing says, Southern Rhodesia is 'a magnificent country, with all its riches in the future. Because it is so empty we can dream.'⁷ Anthony Richmond, a commentator on race relations, explains: actions commanding respects in female employer — male servant relationship were approved, those which threatened to undermine respect, such as undue familiarity or spoiling one's servants were condemned.

Africans in their turn develop a hostile attitude towards Europeans. They grow to expect blame whether deservedly or not, and often assume an attitude of defensive aggressiveness towards the European, lying and cheating being their only weapons against the superior authority and power of the European.⁸

Lessing's views about racialism are expressed in her foreword to Lawrence Vambe's book An Ill-Fated People: Zimbabwe Before and After Rhodes (1972). The knowledge that groups and nations behave like monsters

white preserving a flattering image of themselves in this horrible epoch:

Good kind white Americans wiped out red Indians, lynch negroes, commit genocide in Vietnam. Delightful Australians wipe out aborigines. Good kind decent British, our kitch and kin, run one of the world's nastiest police states, in Rhodesia. In South America civilized governments deliberately exterminate Indian tribes to get their land. A great European nation massacres five million Jews ... and so it goes on.⁹

In spite of all these humiliations inflicted on blacks, Lessing adds further:

No modern black nation has approached the savagery of Germany's recent history, or even, the horror of Voster's South Africa, or Smith's Rhodesia.¹⁰

Thus racialism, for Lessing, is characterized by the atrocious wrongs which the white people have inflicted upon the black in the intensely race-and-class-conscious colonial society.

V

Landscape: What holds these stories together is their 'African-ness':

I believe that the chief gift from Africa to writers, white and black,

is the continent itself, its presence which for some people is like an old fever, latent always in their blood; or like an old wound throbbing in the bones as the air changes. That is not a place to visit unless one chooses to be an exile over afterwards from an inexplicable majestic silence lying just over the border of memory or of thought. Africa gives you the knowledge that man is a small creature, among other creatures, in a large landscape.¹¹

While talking about the importance of landscape Lessing says in the preface to Collected African Stories, Volume-II:

As for the stories like these ... when I write one, it is as if I open a gate into a landscape which is always there ... A certain kind of pulse starts beating, and I recognized it: it is time I wrote another story from that landscape, external and internal at the same time, which was once the Old Chief's Country.¹²

The landscape which pervades almost all the stories is certainly harsh — leopards eat girls who walk alone at night, locusts devastate a farm, a buck with a broken leg is eaten alive by ants, a man pretends to mistake his wife's lover for a wild pig and shoots him.

The landscape is also beautiful, more beautiful perhaps because it is dangerous.

I remember once we caught a glimpse of a duiker grazing on the edge of a farmland that was still half dark. We got on to our stomachs and wriggled through the long grass, not able to see if the duiker was still there. Slowly the field opened up in front of us, a heaving mass of big black clods. We carefully raised our heads, and there, at the edge of the clod-sea a couple of arms-lengths away, where three little duikers, their heads turned away from us to where the sun was about to rise. They were three black, quite motionless silhouettes. Away over the other side of the field, big clods became tinged with reddish gold.¹³

In many of African stories,, landscape is seen selectively through the distortions of need. Distortions like these are seen to be at the core of settler life and they are the result of a double filter: personal need plus a cultural consciousness which actively denies people access to their environment. In 'Winter in July' Julia is grappling with an unwelcome change in her domestic life. She stands in her garden looking back at the house in which she has lived with her husband and his brother for ten years, and notices that the 'large, assertive barn of a place' looks 'naked, raw, crude.' It is a perception that leads her to acknowledge that 'There had always been times when Africa rejected her, when she felt like a critical ghost.'¹⁴ The extreme consequences of an inability to relate are given in The Grass is Singing,

where resistance culminates in Mary Turner's madness and her conception of her death as the bush avenging itself.

In addition to their practical purposes of exploitation which lead these settlers to experience Africa as a psychically dangerous land, they are exposed to danger by a blindness to the present that living in chosen memories of 'Home,' can bring.

The African stories deal with trapped creatures, with people imprisoned by false memories and occasionally with animals held within rigidly limited capacities. The old Africa is not a paradise on earth. They were helpless against their physical environment, a violent one; victims of drought, storms, wild animals and a primitive medicine. Every moment of the old life was a fight for survival. For Lessing what accumulates and grows is the feeling of Africa itself, the love of the place.

The African stories seem to surge out of a single creative impulse, sustained by Lessing's infectious enthusiasm for the landscape that frames the violent collisions of life and death, black and white, civilization and nature.

VI

As no one has seriously dealt with this compre-

hensive contribution made by Doris Lessing in the form of African short-stories, the present dissertation modestly takes up the challenge of exploring all the thematic complexities depicted in the African short-stories and the short-novels included in the following volumes viz.,

1. This Was the Old Chief's Country: Collected African Stories, Vol. I
2. The Sun Between Their Feet: Collected African Stories, Vol. II

The present study operates amongst the contours of colonialism, racialism and the African landscape in all the stories under analysis. The approach taken in the study is purely a thematic one for exploring the African-ness in all her African short-stories and short-novels in the context of the Black-White relationship, the man-woman relationship, the master-servant relationship and the colonizer-environment relationship in a highly charged male dominated racist society of South-Africa.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Franz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 10.
- 2 Lessing's "Introduction" to Nine African Stories (London: Longman, 1968), p. 4.
- 3 Paul Schlueter (ed.), A Small Personal Voice: Essays reviews and interviews (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 75.
- 4 Lessing, Going Home (London: Panther Books, 1968), p. 87.
- 5 Lessing, The Grass Is Singing (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 249.
- 6 Lessing, Going Home (London: Panther Books, 1968), p. 316.
- 7 Ibid, p. 14.
- 8 Eve Bertelsen (ed.), Doris Lessing (Johannesburg, McGraw Hill, 1985), p.46.
- 9 Lessing, "A Foreword to Lawrence Vambe's An Ill-Fated People: Zimbabwe Before and After Rhodes" (1972) in Doris Lessing Newsletter, 4 (Summer 1980), p. 13.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Lessing, Collected African Stories: Vol.I (London: Paladin, 1992), p. 8.
- 12 Lessing, Collected African Stories: Vol.II (London: Panther Books, 1979), p. 11.

13
Ibid, p. 181.

14
Lessing, Collected African Stories: Vol.I (London:
Paladin, 1992), p. 230.