

# Once an Insider, Now an Outsider: Doris Lessing's African Laughter<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

Doris Lessing's *African Laughter* is a travel book including her four visits in 1982, 1988, 1989 and 1992 to Africa, the place where her childhood memories belong to. Pleased to hear the end of the white man's supremacy, she traveled to the country, not only to visit her friends and relatives but also to observe the social and political changes that took place after the country gained its independence. The aim of this article is to analyze the dynamism Lessing observes in Zimbabwe, namely the political controversies, the blending of cultures and the continuation of the colonial hatred in people's attitudes and lifestyle as well as to evaluate her visits as inward journeys to her past through an emphasis on the fallibility of memory.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing, *African Laughter*, journey, home, postcolonialism

## Özet:

Doris Lessing'in gezi kitabı *African Laughter* yazarın 1982, 1988, 1989 ve 1992'de çocukluğunun geçtiği Afrika'ya yaptığı ziyaretlerle ilgili anılarını içerir. Ülkenin bağımsızlığını kazanmasından memnun olan yazar, yalnızca arkadaş ve akrabalarını ziyaretini anlatmakla kalmaz, ülkenin geçirdiği değişimi de aktarır. Bu makalenin amacı, hem Lessing'in Zimbabwe'de gözlemlendiği sömürgeci kültür ile Afrika kültürünün etkileşimi sonucunda doğan değişimi ve sömürgecilerin davranış ve yaşam biçimlerindeki nefreti incelemek hem de bu ziyaretleri yazarın geçmişine yaptığı yolculuk olarak yorumlamaktır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Doris Lessing, *African Laughter*, gezi, yuva, sömürgecilik sonrası edebiyatı

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Doris Lessing, who lived in Southern Rhodesia from the age of five till thirty, decided to move to London in 1949, thinking that despite its natural beauty and perfect climate, she would not bear witnessing the oppression of the colonizers on the black people. While living in Africa she had always fought against colonialism, claiming that “white-dominated Africa cannot last long” (CAS, 11). In the Preface to the first volume of her *Collected African Stories*, she blames Britain for ignoring the suffering of the black nation and thus causing tragic events in Africa (7). She thinks that democracy in Southern Rhodesia “was enjoyed by the whites, but was never extended to the blacks who experienced only various forms of repression under the whites” (AL, 277).

Lessing returned to Africa in 1956 just for a visit and later on wrote her impressions in a book called *Going Home*. After this trip she was exiled from the land for twenty-five years, as she was declared to be a Prohibited Immigrant because of her efforts to abolish the white rule in Africa. She claims that this prohibition meant an exclusion “from my own best self” (AL, 12), since she considers Africa her hometown, the place where her childhood memories belong to.

Lessing’s prohibition ended when Southern Rhodesia, which had been colonized since 1890, became an independent country, now called Zimbabwe, under Robert Mugabe regime in 1980, after the black people won the war fought against the white rule. Pleased

to hear the end of the white man’s supremacy, she traveled to the country in 1982, 1988, 1989 and 1992, not only to visit her friends and relatives but also to observe the political and social changes that took place after the country gained its independence. Lessing’s travel book *African Laughter*, which consists of her observations and conversations with black and white people about the country during these four visits, was published in 1992. Elizabeth Maslen defines the book as containing “short sections, balancing each other, commenting on each other ... and offering by accumulation a remarkably broad and balanced view of past and present, African and European, men and women, old and new ways” (11). Lessing was very excited about these trips, because they meant traveling to her past childhood days as well:

I know writers who very early build tall fences around theirs and afterwards make sure they never go near them.... when the time comes for them to make the first trip home it means stripping off new skin and offering exposed and smarting flesh to - the past. For that matter every child who has left home to become an adult knows the diminishing of the first trip home. (301)

The aim of this article is not only to analyze the dynamism Lessing observes in Zimbabwe, namely the political controversies, the blending of cultures and the continuation of the colonial hatred in people’s attitudes and lifestyle, but also to evaluate her visits as inward journeys to her past through an emphasis on the fallibility of memory.

In terms of the new political state of Zimbabwe, Lessing in her first trip in 1982 notices that people are working hard for a better future. On the whole, she perceives “the vigour, the optimism, the determination of the people” (10). Despite certain discrepancies she hears from both black and white people, she thinks that it is too early to judge the changes, because first of all democratic regime is a new concept for the black people and secondly one should not expect the government to solve the problems immediately after a long lasting war. Lessing thinks that there are promising activities, such as the efforts to establish secondary education. When a black man tells Lessing that they need the whites, not the blacks in governmental and administrative work as they are more intelligent and experienced, Lessing objects to the young man’s idea, saying that they believe “what the whites have been telling” (69) them.

In her following travels to Zimbabwe, however, Lessing’s optimism about the new government gradually declines. She observes that people of both races find the Robert Mugabe regime as unsuccessful, as he does not have enough educated people in administrative positions: people who are placed in governmental positions are not university graduates but Comrades coming from the Bush (155). Zimbabweans also talk about the scandals of the ministers, and that “Mugabe’s economic policy is ruining Zimbabwe because it is creating stagnation” (187). Complaints about the regime attract Lessing’s interest, because here people think that they can influence politics, whereas in Europe “long ago decisions have been removed from the levels where citizens have their being, to summits of power high above their reach” (152).

In her final trip in 1992, what Lessing observes is a very pessimistic view of the Mugabe regime: she claims that “the people have given up hopeful expectation” (431). The citizens’ despair also reflects Lessing’s demoralized mood, as she mainly dwells on the negative aspects of the country, such as the devaluation of the currency, famine, and drought unlike the previous travels. Even though Lessing’s pessimism could well be interpreted as the reflection of a white person’s discriminatory views against the black race, it is more likely that her despair is the result of her disillusionment due to the drastic changes in the country, which will be discussed in the following pages of this article. As Adele Newson also suggests, Lessing’s expectations about “the new black government decreases ... countered by her desire to find the familiar in both landscape and people” (par. 2). One instance to display her distance to white settlers in her last trip is her disapproval of white people’s jokes about black people, finding them “disgusting” (434).

In terms of the white and black citizens’ attitude toward each other Lessing notices that hostility still continues. Most of the whites persist on their colonizer spirit, even if they were defeated in war. Lessing’s white friends, for example, warn her not to give lift to even a black pregnant woman, but she disregards their advice. On another occasion, Lessing hears her brother, who defends the colonial ideology, define the black people as

“inferiors” (48). Lessing’s reply to her brother is a reversal of the argument, condemning the white people in Southern Rhodesia. She thinks:

many [of the whites] were poor material from any point of view. When they were good they were very very good, skillful, adaptable, full of expertise, but the rest were limited, unintelligent, with that kind of complacency that can only go with stupidity. They would not easily get jobs anywhere else and the blacks were only too lucky to have got rid of them. (48)

Nor are the black people sympathetic to white citizens; they regard the white farmers as villains in general. On the walls of government offices, Lessing sees a poster, contrasting a white boss and a black leader:

The Boss drives his men,  
The Leader inspires them.  
The Boss depends on authority.  
The Leader depends on goodwill.  
The Boss evokes fear.  
The Leader radiates love.  
The Boss says “I”.  
The Leader says “We”.  
The Boss shows who is wrong.  
The Leader shows what is wrong.  
The Boss knows how it is done.  
The Leader knows how to do it.  
The Boss demands respect.  
The Leader commands respect.  
So be a leader,  
Not a boss. (231)

“We” and “they” distinction continues, as the black nation has not yet forgotten the white man’s supremacy. A black friend of Lessing’s criticizes the Afrikaners who claim in a TV program that the white people needed help to adapt themselves to a mixed society after the war. He says: “how is it possible? *We* have been exploited, *we* have been ground down, *we* have had our country stolen from us. But it is *they* who have to be given tender loving care” (138).

Despite the antagonism between the two races, however, Lessing observes in 1988 that “the babyish querulous grumbling of the whites only six years ago ... has gone” (183). Some people, for example, prefer to talk about the citizens of Zimbabwe by using the pronoun “we”, because they claim that there should be no such distinctions in terms of skin colour. That there are no different queues for white and black people in public places and that one can see both races in restaurants and hotels is another promising sign,

though Lessing thinks it is very hard to eradicate the hostile attitude between the two races completely.

After the independence of the country the lifestyle of both white and black citizens has changed. Lessing hears that some of the whites have become poorer; they do not have enough money to visit relatives in Britain. She remembers that in her time white people had employed three or four servants in their home, but in 1982 she notices just one servant in most of the farms. Also, Lessing witnesses the adaptation of at least some of the white citizens to the African culture, which they had once disdained. White people eating sadza which used to be the food of black people is one instance of such a transformation. Lessing finds this situation very ironic, saying: “Nothing is more satisfying to the ironies-of-history nerve than to watch those whites who stay in Zimbabwe but preserve their feelings of superiority, filling their plates with sadza. *Then* - in the old days - sadza was kaffir food and no white would dream of eating it” (358).

The diversity in black people’s lifestyle displays the dynamic structure of a new nation. There is the new rich class of black people, called the Chefs, which emerged after the War, and there are people who imitate the life of white people by watching American soap operas, such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, and getting dressed like the white people. Lessing hears the village women complaining about the city girls who ““want to be white blacks”” (368). They dress like models and they apply cosmetics to lighten their skin color. As Frantz Fanon claims, “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness” (18). Thus, it is not only the whites who transform their culture to a new one, but also the blacks who adapt themselves to the customs of the whites whom they detest.

A letter in a newspaper about the new university near Harare also suggests the change in black people’s lifestyle: “you see the black students lying entwined on the grass in the dark, two by two, kissing and much more than that. When they were asked why they behaved like this, since it is not any part of their traditional behaviour, they replied ... ‘But we learned it all from you’” (128). Similarly, when a group of black women who go to Israel are asked why they behave rudely to their hosts, they answer: “But that is how our white madams behave, so we thought it was the way we should behave” (128). Very paradoxically, the black women who have suffered from the domination of white ladies, take these ladies as role models, while treating others exactly the way they were once treated.

In contrast to those who are displaced from their own traditions by feigning white people’s way of life, Lessing perceives that the black people in the villages continue their customs, criticizing the Chefs and the rich black people in the cities. Unlike those leading a luxurious life there is too much poverty and hunger in Communal Areas. People living in the countryside remonstrate the change in their lifestyle, their fall from Eden: ““Once

we lived on the edge of the water... We fished and we hunted and we grew three crops a year in the rich soil. Now we grow one crop a year and we are not allowed to hunt - we are sent to prison if we do” (383).

The dynamism Lessing discerns in politics, people's attitudes and daily life strike her, for they signify a place which not only carries the remnants of colonialism but also is in the process of developing as an independent country. When a black woman approaches Lessing for an interview and asks her opinion about Zimbabwe, she reflects this ambiguity as: “At the moment it is breaking my heart... It's going to take time, but Zimbabwe is on the right path” (109). On the whole, she is excited and pleased to see Zimbabwe become an independent country. The title of the book, *African Laughter*, signifies an optimistic future for the poor black nation, for this laughter is described as “the laughter of poor people” (80).

Lessing's exhilaration about the changes of an independent country leaves its place to nostalgia and displacement, when she visits her childhood places. Her disillusionment is related to the fallibility of memory. In her first trip, while traveling in the countryside she tries to recall views from her childhood, but “A ‘view’ I had believed was fixed for ever, had disappeared. A coil of mountains was lower than I remembered. A peak had come forward and attracted to itself a lesser hill” (19). She claims that “Memory in any case is a lying record: we choose to remember this and not that” (72). Hence, Lessing defines the old days as a “paradise . . . a lost perfection” (57), because the bush, which formed in her mind the ideal of what a forest should be with its different kinds of indigenous trees and wild animals, has lost its characteristic. She remembers that once the sounds of the animals in the bush early morning formed “the dawn chorus” (23) and that she used to identify herself with the animals. However, after the urbanization in the 1980s “the dawn chorus had become a feeble thing” (23). Also, the bush in patches is now filling “spaces between farms and homesteads” (37), as people have been cutting down trees to open up more areas for fields. Considering the country's nature as magnificent, Lessing thinks that the destruction of the natural beauty of Zimbabwe is “more important than, even, the War, and the overthrow of the whites, the coming of the black government” (80).

In her first trip Lessing refrains from visiting her “myth country”, the farm she grew up in, because of “a fear of tampering with [her] myth... Myth does not mean something untrue, but a concentration of truth” (35). When she returns to this childhood place in 1988 after so many years, she suddenly travels to her past, remembering her parents and the landscape she played with her brother. Now that the bush which used to be full of birds and wild animals is gone, everything, for Lessing, “spoke of failure” (316). Apart from the changes in nature, Lessing is upset by the replacement of their farmhouse with a new dull-looking bungalow, which is incomparable to the previous one. As she confesses in *Going Home*, her concept of “home” is based on the first house her family lived in Africa. Since she has lived in over sixty different houses, she has lost her sense

of “home” as a warm comfortable place, and the only peaceful “home” is the one in the bush: “I don’t live anywhere; I never have since I left that first house on the kopje” (594). As Susan Watkins points out, “For Lessing the concept of ‘home’ is always bound up with its other, exile” (101). The reason why that first house has too much effect on the writer is because it was made of logs, mud and grass, “a living thing, responsive to every mood of the weather; and during the time I was growing up it had already begun to sink back into the forms of the bush” (*DLR*, 597). This resemblance of home to a living organism is unlike the rigidity of concrete houses she has occupied in London. She explains why she prefers this house to the dwellings in London in her autobiography, *Under My Skin*:

In London you live in houses where other people have lived, and others again will live there when you have moved or died. A house put together from the plants and earth of the bush is rather like a coat or dress, soon to be discarded, for it probably will have returned to the bush, from fire, insects, or heavy rain long before you die. (54)

Lessing universalizes her sadness, claiming that “every day there are more people everywhere in the world in mourning for trees, forest, bush, rivers, animals, lost landscapes ... you could say this is an established part of the human mind, a layer of grief, always deepening and darkening” (*AL*, 318).

As Michael Kowalewski points out, “The most successful travel narratives generally blend outward spatial aspects of travel (social observation and evocation of alien settings and sensibilities) with the inward, temporal forms of memory and recollection” (9). Lessing’s travels to Africa are from the outward to the inward; her observations of the dynamics of development in terms of politics, people’s attitude, and lifestyle after the country gained its independence are transformed to an inward journey in which nature reminds her her past. Thus, these travels mean for Lessing a revival of the sense of belonging to a previous “home” and at the same time a sense of displacement, as she feels herself to be a stranger when she goes back to her childhood environment.

#### Abbreviations

*African Laughter: AL*

*Collected African Stories: CAS*

*The Doris Lessing Reader: DLR*

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