

The vexed “colour problem”: Doris Lessing and the “African Renaissance”

Patricia Louw¹

Department of English, University of Zululand
plouw@pan.uzulu.ac.za

The question of an African Renaissance is drawing increasing debate among African scholars as they aspire for African unity and the revitalization of African cultures. This involves looking back to Africa’s past and evaluating traditions and customs in order to learn how to shape the future. In this paper it is argued that Doris Lessing, in her African Stories, anticipated post-liberation issues such as the protection of Indigenous Knowledge Systems which have become the cornerstone concepts of the African Renaissance today. She exposes the threat posed by colonial society to African traditions and thereby subverts colonial discourse.

Keywords: Doris Lessing; African Renaissance

Introduction

I am going to begin with a quotation from a recent article in the journal *Rethinking Marxism*:

‘One of the major critical issues of debate in Africa is the question of revitalising African cultures. In South Africa, this has been given the name of African renaissance, and it is perceived as a continental ideology. However, debates are mired in essentialisms that have obscured rather than clarified the potentially unifying effect of the notion in Africa’ (Vambe, Taonezvi Zegeye, Abebe, 2008: abstract). This quotation emphasises the importance of the aspirations of African people in the quest for African unity and the revitalisation of African cultures. Their argument emphasises looking towards the future rather than the past. However, it is difficult to escape references to the past and in particular to precolonial Africa when speaking of renaissance. In fact, in order to revitalise a culture, one must surely look back to see what vitalised it in the first place. So while not disputing the importance of aspirations, I argue that looking back to Africa’s past is an important part of the notion of African renaissance.

The central reason for the need for an African renaissance is the damage done to African culture by colonialism. Indigenous African culture is suppressed and degraded while westernised culture is imposed. Part of this process involves the construction of meaning. In particular, the meaning of history and culture is constructed by colonial discourse during the colonial period. Edward Said explains in *Orientalism* that it is possible “for many objects or places or times to be assigned roles and given meanings that acquire objective validity only *after* the assignments are made” (Said, *Orientalism* (1978) 202). It is, therefore, important for Africans to resist the meanings assigned to their culture by colonial discourse and to re-establish the meanings that they had before the advent of colonialism.

Antony Chennells explains that “an obvious form of anti-colonial resistance to these constructions of a colony’s meaning is to deny their truth: the periphery insists on its rights to draw meanings from itself not as periphery but as centre. Resistance to colonialism is possible, this argument implies, only because the indigenous culture remains intact and therefore possesses its own incontrovertible authority” (1999:113). Indigenous culture is by definition connected to the past, and the system of knowledge that describes that culture is what we now call IKS or Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Thus IKS is an important tool in the restructuring and revitalising of African culture in the African Renaissance.

How then is Doris Lessing connected to Indigenous Knowledge Systems or the African Renaissance? Indeed, one may on the surface think that she represents the colonial ‘other’ as the stories that she writes about Africa are set during the colonial period in Zimbabwe – then Rhodesia, and reflect the settler community. The crucial question is: what meaning does she assign to African culture? Does it support colonial discourse, or does it subvert and undermine it?

When I was teaching Lessing’s *African Stories* to a class of black students at the University of Zululand during the time of the old, Apartheid South Africa, I found that students were initially resistant to these stories. They reacted against what they perceived to be racism in her use of terms, such as “kaffir”, even though this term was used in a non-derogatory way, to describe objects such as the ‘kaffir orange’ tree and the kaffir path. They also objected to her representation of black people in menial relationships to the whites, in master-servant roles. I took these criticisms seriously, and as we were studying protest literature, I suggested that we look more carefully at her representation of black people in the stories to see whether she was in fact making a protest against the colonial discourse, and if so, what kind of protest it was.

1. Patricia Louw is a Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Zululand, South Africa

We studied interviews with Lessing herself and various critical articles and one of the main points that came up was that Lessing puts the “colour problem” in a wider context than its colonial African context. She says in an interview with Eve Bertelsen in 1986:

About this colour bar thing: the point I was making was that it's not just the white man's attitude towards the black, but people's attitudes to each other in general – all over the world you'll have a dominant group despising the rest. This is the pattern. This is what interests me more and more. I've found it very limiting when people say 'you are a writer about colour bar problems'. I wasn't writing only about colour bar problems. Not even my first volume was only about colour bar problems, there were a lot of other themes in it (1986: 138).

This broader cognitive framework enabled the students to distance themselves slightly from the emotive force of the terms and to accept their use as being a reflection of the way people spoke at that time. However, the danger of a broader framework is that it can lead to over-generalisation. Eve Bertelsen is concerned that making it a universal problem 'lets the colonialist off the hook' as it were. She asks Lessing, 'I wonder whether when you ask the reader to take a general meaning out of the stories you are downplaying the historical particulars – the fact that there were specific policies that caused the suffering and problems in Rhodesia at that historical time?' Lessing's reply to this, apart from the above quotation was, 'what you want me to do is to write didactic novels.' (1986:139) Bertelsen of course denies this but it is exactly what the students would probably have responded to. They wanted the criticism against racism to be clearly defined and unequivocal. When Lessing depicts characters in her stories making racist remarks or behaving in a condescending or paternalistic way towards Blacks, she is showing what the settlers were like. Her views are different. The distinction between Lessing's own viewpoint and that of the characters in the stories was not immediately evident to the students, however, and it took some close examination of individual stories for the students to be able to see that Lessing's criticism of racism was more subtle and nuanced than what the students had come to expect from other, more simplistic and indeed caricatured representations of racist attitudes, and also novels with a high level of didactic content.

The students' objection to seeing blacks being portrayed as servants is reinforced by Eileen Manion, who acknowledges that Lessing's representation of black people in her African fiction is restricted. She says, 'Within her African novels and stories, there are few educated Africans, and the predominating relationship between whites and blacks is that of master and servant ... Seldom do we see in her fiction Africans and Europeans forming friendships, having (non-exploitative) love affairs, or uniting in political action' (1982, 435).

However, what we discovered was that even within this restricted framework, Lessing portrays black people as being in some way superior to the whites. Their power is limited within the colonial system but nevertheless has an impact on the whites and it points to the value of their indigenous culture while simultaneously showing up the arrogance, paternalism or rude behaviour of the whites. Stories which illustrate this point are “The Old Chief Mshlanga”, “A Home for Highland Cattle” and “No Witchcraft for Sale.”

“The Old Chief Mshlanga” is a well-known story which has received considerable critical attention. The story has autobiographical elements in it and the focus of criticism has mostly been on the young white girl and her slowly evolving consciousness about the way colonialism affects the lives of the black inhabitants of the land. This is prompted by an unexpected meeting between her and Chief Mshlanga on her father's farm. What needs to be highlighted here in terms of the African Renaissance is that the reader is given a glimpse of the precolonial order in the person of the Chief. Significantly, he behaves with grace and dignity in the face of the arrogant young girl, heir to the land he has lost. The narrator (as retrospective “I”), acknowledges this as she describes the meeting:

A Chief! I thought, understanding the pride that made the old man stand before me like an equal – more than an equal, for he showed courtesy, and I showed none.

The old man spoke again, wearing dignity like an inherited garment, still standing ten paces off, flanked by his entourage, not looking at me (that would have been rude) but directing his eyes somewhere over my head at the trees (1994:16).

The girl violates the code of politeness which forbids that a young girl address a chief by his name and asks him directly what his name is. One young man of his entourage answers for him, thus rescuing him from further humiliation. Later in the story she again breaks the social codes by going to his homestead to see him there. Again we as readers are allowed an opportunity to see the style and beauty of the traditional African architecture. This makes the outcome of the story more shocking as the homestead falls to ruin after the Old Chief is forced to leave his land, thus underlining the displacement of the indigenous people during colonialism. However, the traditional African culture is held up as something to be admired and tragically mourned for as it is destroyed and humiliated in this story. It is captured iconically in the picture of the Old Chief when he comes to see the farmer (the narrator's father) at the end of the story to discuss the damage his goats have done to the land.

He arrived at our house at the time of sunset one evening, looking very old and bent now, walking stiffly under his regally-draped blanket, leaning on a big stick. My father sat himself down in his big chair below the steps of the house; the old man squatted carefully on the ground before him, flanked by his two young men (1994: 23).

The Old Chief has no power in this situation – colonialism has robbed him of his power but the sad picture of his “regally-draped blanket” is a poignant reminder of his once powerful position in society. The father sitting in his big chair, comfortable and superior while the chief squats in a menial position is surely one of the lasting and memorable pictures Lessing has created in these stories of colonial power, while the narrator looks on, helpless to prevent it but describing the ‘pathetic, ugly scene, doing no one any good.’ In situations like this, where the white settler is wielding power over the black inhabitant, Lessing often shows that the power relations damage both sides. There is a sense of impotence and hopelessness in the narrator’s reaction. She deplores the harm that is being done to the Chief and his people, but must also accept that harm has been done to her father as well, since his fields have been damaged by the Chief’s goats. It’s a situation where no one wins and the chief’s last statement rings out ironically today, when we know what the consequences of the settler appropriation of land has been in Zimbabwe.

Lessing shows us how traditional cultural values of African society are denigrated and degraded. It is partly due to colonialism and also due to urbanisation and poverty (which one could say is a result of colonialism). Lobola, for example, is treated with grotesque tragi-comedy in “The Home for Highland Cattle.” The young, liberal-minded British couple, newly arrived from England, has a difficult time adjusting to the African experience. For Marina, it is the older British settlers she has the most difficulty with, as their conservative views clash directly with her liberal outlook. For Philip, it is the reality of working with black farmers in the bush. His intervention is that of an agricultural adviser as he is a soil scientist. Faced with the difficulties of the situation on the ground where there is over-grazing and soil erosion, he focuses on getting black farmers to reduce their herds. In a note to his wife he writes:

Spent this morning as planned, trying to persuade these blacks it is better to have one fat ox than ten all skin and bone, never seen such erosion in my life, gullies twenty feet deep, and the whole tribe will starve next dry season, but you can talk till you are blue, they won’t kill a beast till they’re forced ... Until all this mystical nonsense about cattle is driven out of their fat heads, we might as well save our breath (Lessing, 1994: 271).

Significantly, he does not mention the fact that the reason for overgrazing is that the land available to black farmers has been drastically reduced by the settler government. He chooses rather to belittle the custom as “mystical nonsense.”

However, this view reflects no doubt a commonly-held opinion in settler society. Lessing satirises this young couple and is ironic about their liberal ideas which seem to get whittled away quite quickly.

Later in the narrative, Marina intervenes in her servant Charlie’s lobola problems by giving him a painting of Highland Cattle to use instead of real cattle. She and Philip then transport Charlie and the painting to his prospective father-in-law’s shack in an informal settlement outside the city. The ludicrous inappropriateness of the gift illustrates the extent to which colonialism imposes its stamp on the culture and traditions of Africa.

The grotesque humour of the scene changes to a tone of deep sadness and loss as the narrator reports the man’s reminiscences. He tells the young people about “the long courting, according to the old customs, how, with many gifts and courtesies between the clans, the marriage had been agreed on, how the cattle had been chosen, ten great cattle, heavy with good grazing” (Lessing, 1994: 293). The narrator writes, “He was asking them to contrast their graceless behaviour with the dignity of his own marriages, symbolised by the cattle, which were not to be thought of in terms of money, of simply buying a woman – not at all. They meant so much: a sign of good feeling, a token of union between the clans, an 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.” (1994:293).

His words bring out the nostalgia for the pre-colonial times when the customs were respected and the land was available to graze enough cows. By satirising the British couple, Lessing undermines their views, whereas by lending beauty and poignancy to the words of the man talking about lobola, she counteracts the effect of Philip’s dismissive tone and brings out the true value of the African traditions.

Another aspect of African tradition that Lessing demonstrates the value of is that of indigenous knowledge about medicinal plants. This is the central issue in the story “No Witchcraft for Sale”: one of the most ironical of her stories. Irony is encapsulated in the title, in what Chennells refers to as “the constituting gaze of the metropole” (113) the denigrated term, ‘witchcraft’ is used to denote the superstitious, primitive side of ‘savage’ life in Africa. It carries with it all the nuances of the superiority of western society, their rationality and scientific and technological superiority. It contains the way in which Africans were viewed by the white colonisers. But the irony is that it is this very “witchcraft” which saves little Teddy Farquar’s eyes when he is spat at by a poisonous snake. Western medicine is powerless to help him.

In this story, Gideon saves the eyesight of a little white boy, Teddy, who is the only son of Gideon’s employer, Mrs Farquar. Gideon has a double identity. He works as a servant in her kitchen but is also one of the most famous medicine

men of the district. His knowledge of indigenous plants enables him to quickly find a plant in the veld which is an antidote to the snake's poison. This story demonstrates the superiority of indigenous knowledge as opposed to western scientific knowledge. However, Lessing does not leave the story there. She continues to demonstrate how imperialism reaches over the realms of indigenous knowledge.

The news of this healing spreads through the district and as a result a scientist visits the farm in order to find out about the plant that was used. A conflict then ensues between Gideon and the whites as they try to persuade him to show them the plant. Eventually he seems to give in: "He lifted his head, gave a long, blank angry look at the circle of whites, who seemed to him like a circle of yelping dogs pressing around him, and said: 'I will show you the root'" (1994: 41).

What he does, however, is to lead them through the bush in the hot afternoon sun for two hours, and then finally pick a random plant "that had been growing plentifully all down the paths they had come" (1994: 41). In this way Gideon manages to stave off intervention from western science and protects the sacred knowledge which had been passed down to him by his forefathers. The whites are punished for trying to force the knowledge out of him, and the knowledge remains intact and secret, hence the title.

This story shows that Doris Lessing was aware of the problems related to the protection of intellectual capital and indigenous knowledge systems long before the topic became popular. What the colonial discourse denigrated as Africa's weaknesses, "Negritude valorized as sites of power and as superior ways of being and knowing" (Chennells, 1999: 113). What Lessing does is to show that Africans such as Gideon possess such "superior ways of being and knowing" and that these are in fact under attack from the whites – or under from the colonial centres of power and knowledge. They wish to incorporate these into their own systems which have been shown to be lacking when it comes to experiences of Africa.

Through these stories we have seen that Lessing shows respect for certain African customs and traditions: for the traditional structures of African society such as the Chief, and the dignity that such a position can carry with it; for the traditional system of lobola and what that represents, and lastly for the knowledge and power of indigenous plants and their medicinal value. She gives them value through the narrative and in this way supports the notions of African Renaissance and Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

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