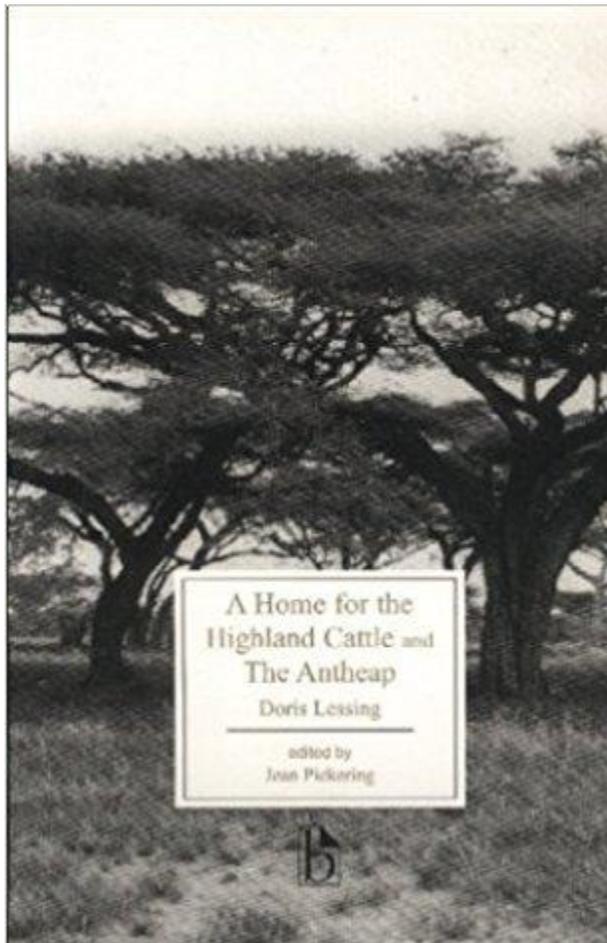


**Salience of the Color Clash in Doris Lessing's
*A Home for Highland Cattle***

Dr. R. Vijaya



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Home-Highland-Cattle-Anthep/dp/1551113635>

Abstract

The African continent having been a victim of colonization and apartheid has undergone several social, economic, cultural and political changes which have paved the way for the

emergence of literary effusions contributing to the complexity of African fiction. Out of the contemporary writers presenting pan-African insight, Doris May Lessing enjoys international reputation for her sensitive records of her concrete firsthand knowledge of human drama. The article entitled “Salience of the Color Clash in Doris Lessing’s *A Home for Highland Cattle*” examines how history is fictionalized by a writer who was brought up in South Africa, whose part of work has been set in Southern Rhodesia. In her Novella *A Home for Highland Cattle*, her heroine Marina Giles acts as an empowerment agent for the oppressed black natives with a daring refusal to compromise with the pre-war white settlers who treat the poor natives as the “other,” and share a common notion about their immorality and inferiority. Though Marina seems to succeed, to some extent, all her efforts of good will to bring justice to the most marginalized natives Charlie and Theresa end up in failure the moment she vacates her rented house.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, *A Home for Highland Cattle*, salience, colonization, inhumanity, injustice, color-clash, inferiority, marginalized

Structures of Power

Structures of power for ages together, have been described in terms of centre and peripheral. These structures, though neither the centre nor the margin is fixed, operate in a more complex and multifaceted way. Hence, the perception and description of experience as “subaltern” or “marginal” is a consequence of this binary-structure of various kinds of dominant powers like Imperialism, Patriarchy, and Ethnocentrism. The position of centrality is accorded based on several facts such as birth, color, culture and gender. The “subaltern” or “marginal,” therefore, indicates a position inferior to or peripheral to the centre, owing to the limitations, mentioned afore, of the subjects’ access to power or to the centre. The misconception that power is a function only of the centre, has led the marginalized to resistance and such resistance has become a process of replacing the centre by reorganizing the binary structure of centre and margin, which is a primary feature of post-colonial discourse.

The African Continent has been a victim of such power structure; it has been a victim of colonization and apartheid and hence, it has always been in a state of flux. It has undergone several social, economic, cultural and political changes. The turmoil of these changes has paved way for the emergence of literary effusions contributing to the complexity of African fiction. The nuances of both the African and non- African authors’ experiences provide multiple perspectives. Out of the contemporary writers presenting pan-African insight, Doris May Lessing, laureate of 2007 Nobel Prize in literature, enjoys international reputation for her sensitive records of the concrete firsthand knowledge of human drama--drama of the colonizer and the colonized--that took place on Joseph Conrad’s “Dark Continent.”

Doris Lessing

Doris Lessing is a name to be surmised with in the history of the post war II English fiction. She is an eminent woman novelist who holds a unique position among the twentieth-century woman writers for the sheer number, variety and scope of her work. She has been labeled variously as an uncompromising Feminist, unabashed Marxist, unflinching Sufi etc. She has

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exhibited a committed engagement to diverse concerns of our times for the six decades since 1950 and has produced extraordinary works that address the most pressing issues our times like social, racial gender and environmental concerns. No other novelist since D.H. Lawrence has explored the aspects of love, man-woman relationship and need for empathy for the underdog in such a passionate manner as Lessing. It can be said that she has given a new dimension to the art of fiction.

Born in Kermanshah, Iran to British parents, victims of the World War I, Lessing grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where her father bought 4000 acres of land for maize farming and failed. Southern Rhodesia was Lessing's home for twenty-five years and hence, Lessing's first encounter with inequalities occurred during her stay in Southern Rhodesia from 1923 to 1949, which marked her impressionistic and sensitive period of adolescence, as a member of white settler community in colonial Africa. Naturally the African landscape forms an integral part of Lessing's fictional writings from her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* to the last novel *Alfred and Emily*. She writes in *Going Home*:

I worked out recently that I have lived in over sixty houses, flats and rented rooms during the past twenty years and not in one of them have I felt at home.... The fact is, I don't live anywhere; I never have since I left that first house on the Kopje. (37)

She could never forget the primitive nature of the house, the unceasing war against the destructive ants and insects, the magnificent night, the long grass and the talking crickets etc. But at the same time, her strong feeling and constant concern for the dispossessed and oppressed Africans has deeply influenced her creative writings. From her first *African Stories* onwards, she suggests that her mythic Africa, the remembered Rhodesia of her childhood, is at one a place of pain and suffering, yet a great source that has inspired her to put into prospective, the human condition.

Most Marginalized Sections

Lessing witnessed the most marginalized section of the colonial situation in the form of the dispossessed natives of Africa, who were subject to the shameful and inhuman treatment by the white colonizers. The dispossessed natives were robbed off the legitimate right of their native soil and were pushed to the margins in every aspect. She experienced the illogicalities of discriminatory mechanism in colonial Africa. Lessing comments in the *Preface for 1964 Collection, Collected Short Stories Volume I*:

And while the cruelties of the white man towards the black man are among the heaviest counts in the indictment against humanity, colour prejudice is not our original fault, but only one aspect of imagination that prevents us from seeing us in every creature that breathes under the sun. (8)

Lessing's Anti-Racial and Anti-Colonial Attitude

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Lessing's anti-racial and anti-colonial attitude to the people of South Africa becomes clear from these words. She did not discriminate between the white and the black like other settlers, and vehemently opposed the view that Africans were inferior to them on account of their skin color and savagery. Don Jacobson describes the view of white colonizers towards the black in his comment: "A white South African for example, feels no need to ask himself how the black man came to be his inferior; he simply knows that the black is inferior" ("The Story of an African Farm" 7). The white novelists generally projected this hostile view about the South Africans. But Doris Lessing is markedly different from these prejudiced writers.

Replaced History with Myth

The colonizers replaced history with their myth. The most powerful myth created by the white settlers was that Africa was a backward and savage country which needed the civilizing influence of the European White culture. To them, Africa was a primitive continent and a place of adventure. The white settlers regarded the Africans as a branch of human race that could be civilized only by the white men. The native Africans were being mocked at with the European label of contempt, "kaffir." The native as kaffir was to be ridiculed, hounded and unconsciously feared for his/her infidelity.

Lessing Challenges the Colonial Myth

But unlike the other White settlers, Doris Lessing challenges the colonial myth of the white superiority and their treatment of the natives as underdogs. In her preface to her *African Stories*, she points out the truth boldly:

...indignation about the color bar in Africa had not yet become part of the furniture of the progressive conscience. If people had been prepared to listen, two decades earlier, to the small, but shrill-enough voices crying out for the world's attention, perhaps the present suffering in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia could have been prevented. Britain who is responsible, became conscious of her responsibility too late; and now the tragedy must play itself slowly out. (5)

She has painfully pointed out that though it was a great advantage to be a part of a society in rapid dramatic change, in a long run, to wake up every morning to witness a fresh evidence of inhumanity, to be reminded twenty times a day of injustice was something heartrending (6). Hence, the tone of her stories is always sympathetic, with Lessing understanding the thoughts and feelings like a narrator who has suffered similar losses and crises of his/her own.

A Home for Highland Cattle

Lessing in her African fiction often shows her scorn for the halfhearted liberal, the aristocratic do-gooder who does not really commit himself/herself to the marginalized. In her novella *A Home for Highland Cattle*, which was published in 1953, Doris Lessing hints at the failure of such romantic and liberal reformist Marina Giles due to her lack of understanding about the colonial mechanism to bring justice to the victims of colonization in Southern Rhodesia.

This long story *A Home for Highland Cattle*, revolves around the empowerment efforts and the subsequent failure of Marina Giles, wife of a British civil servant, who comes to Southern Rhodesia with her husband, a soil scientist, soon after the World War II, in search of a house. She is described as romantic and liberal, “who wanted to live in the group of amiable people, pleasantly interested in the arts, who read the *New Statesman*, week by week, and held that discreditable phenomenon like the colour bar and the black white struggle could be solved by sufficient good will” (*A Home for Highland Cattle* 246). Lessing says with a touch of irony that such liberals were produced in plenty during the thirties in Britain. Mrs. Giles’ search for home brings her for a temporary stay in the old locality in the city to 138 Cecil Vista, name she associates with oppressive British Empire and its ethos. The old houses, in this housing scheme, are small and ill-lit like dungeons; the tenants who have been living in the old houses are pre-war white settlers in Africa, who belong to the lower middle class, working as engine drivers and assistant haberdashers. The African natives of this locality are working as menials and houseboys in these white settlers’ houses. These residents, though they are living in underprivileged condition, treat the African black natives with contempt. Mrs. Giles tries to bring justice to the marginalized natives by treating them with dignity and scorning the whites for their irrational protest against her reformist steps. Mrs. Giles’ efforts to support the oppressed natives by invoking the rules and regulations succeed to some extent in bringing justice to them, especially to her houseboy Charlie. She offers her landlady’s huge picture of prize “Highland Cattle” so that Charlie can legitimize his lover Theresa, by buying her as his wife. The white woman tries to understand the way the black society operates, and the boy genuinely appreciates her efforts, but still at the end of the story, Mrs. Giles, now no longer living in the rented flat, fails to recognize her former houseboy while the police march him handcuffed to jail. She is ironically portrayed as too busy in buying a table for her new house, although her gift has led to his imprisonment. Doris expresses her strong contempt for the white woman’s non-committal efforts to the cause of the socially oppressed.

Pre-war White Settlers

One can see at the centre of this colonial set up the pre-war white settlers, who treat the black natives as the “other.” They do not hesitate to share their conventional notions about the natives’ immorality, dishonesty and inferiority. Mrs. Skinner, for example, the landlady of Mrs. Giles, warns her of Charlie’s dishonesty:

You must keep an eye on Charlie, anyway; He never does a stroke more than he has to. He is bred bone lazy. You’d better keep an eye on the food too. He steals. I had to have the police to him last month, when I lost my Garnet brooch, of course he had sworn he hadn’t taken it, but I haven’t laid my hands on it since. My husband gave him a good hiding but Master Charlie came up smiling as usual. (257)

Natives are Victims

The natives are victims of white settlers’ prejudices and physical violence. The native houseboys suffer economic marginalization. Their salary is not more than seventeen to nineteen

shillings, which is a very meager amount to make their both ends meet. When Marina finds the servant's quarter shabby and full of squalor, she is shocked helplessly:

“Dear me, how awful!” The room was very small. The brick walls unplastered the tin of the roof bare, focusing the sun's intensity inwards all day. The floor was cement, and the blankets that served as beds lay directly on it.... In the space between the lavatories and the servant's rooms stood eight rubbish cans, each covered by its cloud of flies, and exuding a stale sour smell. (248)

When Marina raises Charlie's salary to twenty-five shillings, the white neighbors burst into a rage of exasperation. They form a union and protest against her benevolent gesture to the oppressed community. When Marina offers Charlie an improved ration of vegetables and meat, Mrs. Pond approaches Marina as the representative of the white settlers and warns her that the natives are not used to eating vegetables and that their stomachs cannot digest such nutritious food; she also adds that Marina is trying to instill new ideas in the minds of the natives which will provoke rebellion. But Marina justifies her action by pointing out the new regulations passed by the government.

Theresa, the Most Marginalized Girl

The most marginalized character is the black native girl Theresa, who works for Mrs. Black a white settler of the locality. Mrs. Black exploits her inhumanly for twelve hours from morning till night without paying attention to her living conditions. When Theresa, being unable to walk ten miles a day to the native reserve, shares Charlie's room along with other houseboys, Mrs. Black condemns her for her low standard of morality. But Marina expresses her deep concern and tries to alleviate her trouble. When Marina learns that Charlie is in love with Theresa and wants to marry her, she arranges for his bride money that amounts to six oxen by offering the painting of the "Highland Cattle" which was owned by her landlady as a reminder of the Victorian relic. Marina keeps an amount of seven pounds for Mrs. Skinner's painting as its price. Marina succeeds in saving the young native girl's life and brings dignity to the young native couple.

Charlie and Theresa

However, both Charlie and Theresa are accused of stealing Mrs. Skinner's painting and a few of her household articles after Marina has vacated her house. Doris Lessing ends her story with an ironic twist that while the accused couple are marched to jail, Marina is busy buying a table for her new house and she has failed to recognize the couple.

Maria has failed to notice the fact that once she has vacated the colony, the white settlers' colonizer mindset will bounce back to underscore the colonized. Mrs. Skinner thus, proves her vindictive gesture by complaining against the innocent young native couple and thereby ascertains her superiority.

To Conclude

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To sum the discourse, it can well be said that Doris Lessing's *African Stories* depicts her insistence on the need for universal love and empathy for the marginalized to uplift their position to the centre.

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