A BACKGROUND FEMININE CHARACTER IN *ALEXANDRIA QUARTET*

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Abstract

The *Alexandria Quartet* by Lawrence Durrell has some key characters among which there is the city of Alexandria. In each stage of the narrative, the city is projected more vividly and powerfully. Its world is created by the characters themselves, re-imagined continually until you have every detail to form an enormous puzzle. Each personage interferes with the city according to their character. Justine, the most complex and mysterious of all, is most involved in and influenced by the city atmosphere.

Thus, the city of Alexandria is overwhelmingly present in the first volume of the *Quartet*. In the second and the third volume, the city is less present and mostly depicted through the two characters' eyes. Balthazar is a writer and the city is more like a mirage, an imaginary setting, where love is met in all its aspects. Mountolive presents the city through the eyes of a diplomat, more statistically and pragmatically. The cycle is closed by Clea, in the fourth volume, who sees the city as being both illusion and reality. In this volume Alexandria, as if ending its literary purpose, is an "old reptile", a curse, a "princess and a whore". The scenery is drawn more towards the harbour, as the city has been changed into an orphanage by the war.

Throughout the four books, Alexandria is depicted as a multi-faceted, changeable, mysterious, full-of-contrasts city, which hosts a mixture of Occident and Orient. We see it living through all the seasons, every hour of the day and night, sunny and rainy weather, time of peace and war.

Lawrence Durrell creates a Mediterranean space formed of Egypt, Greece, Turkey, and the islands of the Aegean Sea and those of The Ionic. This cultural space is enriched with discrete echoes from Armenia, Syria and Palestine. "Fragments of every language – Armenian, Greek, Amharic, Moroccan Arabic; Jews from Asia Minor, Pontus, Georgia; mothers born in Greek settlements on the Black Sea; communities cut down like the branches of trees, lacking a parent body, dreaming of Eden. These are the poor quarters of the city; they bear no resemblance to those lively streets built and decorated by foreigners where the brokers sit and sip their morning papers." (*Justine* 1969: 55)

Galea (1996) says that both the landscape and the time are mingled with myth and human history, the individual being thus a projection of the regional spirit. "Capitally, what is this city of ours? What is resumed in the word Alexandria? In a flash my mind's eye shows me a

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thousand dust-tormented streets. Flies and beggars own it today – and those who enjoyed an intermediate existence between either. Five races, five languages, a dozen creeds: five fleets turning through their greasy reflections behind the harbour bar. But there are more than five sexes and only demotic Greek seems to distinguish among them." (*Justine* 1969: 12)

The past is lit by Alexandria's events. There is a constant dialogue between past and present. The emblematic landmarks are both from the political world (Alexander the Great, Plotin and Amr) and from the erotic one (Antony and Cleopatra: "A drunken whore walks in a dark street at night, shedding snatches of song like petals. Was it in this that Antony heard the heart-numbing strains of the great music which persuaded him to surrender for ever to the city he loved?" (*Justine* 1969: 12). Durrell places the erotic myth of search inside the political myth of the foundation of the city.

Darley, both a character and narrator, identifies the city of fascination and obscenity, of terrifying squalor and sublime poetry with human destiny, particularly with the destinies of the four main characters of the novel. The image of the city identifies itself with individuals; it is a living body in time and space, with its physiology and metaphor. Although it is placed within real scenery made by Lake Mareotis, the nearby desert or the port, it is nevertheless a world of fantasy spiced with colours and scents:

"Streets that run back from the docks with their tattered rotten supercargo of houses, breathing into each other's mouths, keeling over… The black ribbon of flies attaching itself to the lips and eyes of the children – the moist beads of summer flies everywhere; the very weight of their bodies snapping off ancient flypapers hanging in the violet doors of booths and cafes. The smell of the sweat-leathered Berberinnis, like that of some decomposing stair-carpet. And then the street noises: shriek and clang of the water-bearing Saidi, dashing his metal cups together as an advertisement, the unheeded shrieks which pierce the hubbub from time to time, as of some small delicately-organized animal being disembowelled. The sores like ponds – the incubation of a human misery of such proportions that one is aghast, and all one's feelings overflow into disgust and terror." (*Justine* 1969: 21)

The spatial-time relationship of the novel is a cultural concept, generating history and human experience. Durrell's impotence to reveal the nature of the relations among his characters is due to "total failure to record the inner truth of the city" (*Clea* 1967: 10). The city comprises concentrically the essence of the world, until its last element, the book we read.

Darley, like great historical founders, rebuilds the city, shapes it from memory and imagination, reflecting the relationship between biography and literature or the critical point when pain becomes art, as he says. "I had to come here in order to completely rebuild this city in my brain." (*Justine* 1969: 13)

Alexandria is the principal space where events occur with its everyday bustle, full of history, anecdotes and memories. On the desert island, Darley can make up with time and happenings, making use of no historical references. Time on the island is measured by tides ("In the great quietness of these winter evenings there is one clock: the sea." *Justine* 1969: 14), while Alexandria's time is measured by the clock. The geographical and temporal opposition is a perfect epistemological frame where the dichotomy presence and absence is rendered in emotional and cognitive terms. The tension between present and past shapes the narration, which emphasizes the relations among the characters and their vision of the real world.

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Darley identifies himself with the city and tries to know it better in order to discover his inner self. Its image is his own image. The lethargic atmosphere dominated by an exhaustion of the spirit, a thirst for knowledge is the projection of his own state of mind, an ideal place for poetical reveries, as the city itself is identified with a human being: "I walked slowly among these extraordinary human blooms, reflecting that a city like a human being collects its predispositions, appetites and fears. It grows to maturity, utters its prophets, and declines into hebetude, old age or the loneliness which is worse than either." (*Justine* 1969: 166.)

The regained and recreated reality is in Durrell's novel either contained in the intimate diaries of Justine, Nessim or Arnauti, in Balthazars notes, or in "the strong-rooms of the memory" (*Balthazar* 1958: 14). The distinction between fictional truth and reflected reality shrinks as the theory of novel progresses. A modern concept says that reality is not necessarily taken for granted. It is a mixture of facts, social conventions, personal perspective and linguistic patterns. Permanent changes in the forms of knowledge and power recreates reality.

The temporal and subjective character of any truth is found in the mirror game. As Justine is the pluralist vision of the world reflected in many mirrors, so is the city, with a thousand facets. Each character has more than one mask, and the city displays a multitude of aspects. Everything can be seen from different perspectives: characters, events, scenery, putting together bits and pieces like a kaleidoscope, or one story generating another, in The-Thousand-Nights-and-a-Night style. The broken mirror symbolizes Pursewarden's suicidal act, who could not go, as James Gifford (1999) says, beyond the reflexive mirror world into a world of absolute truth. He goes on saying that *The Alexandria Quartet* is superficially "an Orientalist text" because it "stirs ideas of the mystical Muslim world", primarily existing in the minds of the Westerners. This superficial image is quickly replaced by a totally unknown Orient. "The relative nature of perception […] is shown to exist behind the therefore false knowledge of the Orient and Occident alike." (Gifford 1999: 2)

The best display of the mixture of nationalities and religions is to be found during carnival time, when saints are celebrated and the Christian prayer is accompanied by erotic outbreak, the rhythm of tribal music, circus effects, hypnosis or nervous delirium. This spectacle, not being characterized by any hierarchy, becomes grotesque and lugubrious.

"But everything now settled into the mindless chaotic dance-figures of the black jazz supported only by the grinding drums and saxophones, the voices. The spirits of the darkness had taken over, you'd think, disinheriting the daylight hearts and minds of the maskers, plunging them ever deeper into the loneliness of their own irrecoverable identities, setting free the polymorphous desires of the city. The tide washed them up now onto the swampy littorals of their own personalities – symbols of Alexandria, a dead brackish lake surrounded by the silent, unjudging, wide-eyed desert which stretches away into Africa under a dead moon." (*Balthazar* 1969: 201)

In conclusion, the reader cannot grasp the atmosphere of the book, the deeds of the characters and the gist of the story without breathing the air, treading the streets, meeting the inhabitants and living the tradition of the city setting, Alexandria.

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