



The Image of Africa in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* and J. M. G. Le Clézio's *The African*

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Abstract. Various encounters with the African continent have been a popular topic in literature since the resurgence of (post)colonial discourse. Even though both Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* and Le Clézio's *The African* discuss the experience of living in Africa as a non-native citizen, the characters approach the infinity of the African space from very different angles. While Lessing's South Rhodesia is presented as a vast barren land (hence the title taken from T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*), Le Clézio's South Africa is a wild and luscious terrain holding new opportunities.

These inherently different portrayals of the African space are also significant from the point of view of the protagonists. The openness of space both enables and restricts the characters in different ways. While Mary and Dick Turner are just as dry and desolate as the land they are desperately trying to cultivate, the child Le Clézio basks in the ambiance of this voluptuous body that is Africa. These clashing images eventually culminate in the appearance of physicality and violence which are prominent motifs in both novels. However, while in *The African*, this violence becomes significant as a liberating presence hidden in the endless space, in *The Grass Is Singing*, violence emerges when the protagonists feel trapped by the unconquerable enormity of the land. It is these double and often opposing perceptions that this paper aims to explore, focusing on the significance of spatial images of Africa.

Keywords: Africa, white settlers, spatial images, violence

The African continent has always been approached from a double perspective: on the one hand, it is considered to be the cradle of all humanity, the origin of all human life, but on the other hand, it is also regarded as the remnant of old and primitive times, especially in the eyes of the white colonisers. Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*, which tells the story of a murder and J. M. G. Le Clézio's *The African*, a tribute to the author's father, show two juxtaposed images of Africa, reflecting on the double historical interpretation of the continent. In Lessing's case, it is not only the land and the African atmosphere that are described as dry and suffocating but the inhabitants (the white settlers in particular) as well. By contrast, the child Le Clézio's image of Africa keeps all the positive attributes and his family's moving to Africa is described as a true return to the roots of human existence.

The contradiction between these two representations of Africa is not only evident in the image of the continent itself but in the portraits of the protagonists as well. In both cases, the characters belong to a group of white settlers who had set foot in Africa generations ago (i.e. they are not pioneers¹). However, the two sets of characters are still in very different positions, which profoundly influences the formation of their personalities. The main aim of this essay is to investigate and to compare these clashing images of Africa, starting with the spatial representation of the continent, which is later transposed onto the characters, creating dichotomised, yet opposing portraits. Primary in these depictions is physicality and bodily images which lead to violence, another significant motif in both novels. It is essentially through this path – creating a parallel between body and land and unifying it with violence – that the true difference between Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* and Le Clézio's *The African* can be best grasped and understood.

1. The “wasteland” and the “material ecstasy” – Images of the African space

Doris Lessing famously takes her title from T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, published in 1922. In this poem, Eliot blends antique myths and representations of contemporary society, which finally result in a sombre and pessimistic vision. In one of the most cited passages – which is incidentally Lessing's epigraph as well – the poet establishes a juxtaposition between the arid landscape and an enclosed space.

¹ Saying that, one has to remark – and this will be evident in the analysis as well – that even though Mary and Dick Turner are not uninitiated in the African ways, they always remain pioneers in a certain sense: the African land remains elusive and unreachable for the European man; he will never become a true African. Similarly, even though the family of the young Le Clézio joins a white community which has been established in Africa for a long time, the experience is completely new for him. Thus, there is always a perpetual novelty in the experience of Africa.

In this decayed hole among the mountains
 In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
 Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
 There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
 It has no windows, and the door swings,
 Dry bones can harm no one. (Eliot 1963, 68)

The horizon is already limited and full of images that reflect on a physical and intellectual decline but it is with the appearance of the chapel in the middle of the barren landscape that the poem becomes truly desolate. It is not only the futility and eventual death of the Western myths (Thorpe 1978, 17) that is accentuated in the passage but the hopelessness of ever changing for the better.

Lessing uses a technique similar to Eliot's: parallel to the African space, she also presents the main characters' cottage as the central place of events. Mary, who grew up and has lived her whole life in the town, marries Dick Turner, a farmer who is in perpetual combat with nature. She moves into his cottage which is situated in the middle of the savage terrain. They live in a miserable, yet self-imposed poverty without any promise of redemption. The Turners share the suffering of all African farmers but since they belong to the "poor whites," they are forced to feel it even more profoundly. When Mary arrives at the farm for the first time, she is stupefied to discover their standards of living but she stays optimistic for a long while. However, she is closed up in a suffocating place where it often becomes unbearable to live, and consequently, she slowly goes paranoiac and eventually disturbed.

This process is not entirely due to the infinity and impossibility of the African land, which could be envisaged as a vast cemetery full of "tumbled graves," perpetually tormented by the burning and unending sun, but also due to the closed and suffocating little cottage. In the middle of "this vast, harsh country" (Lessing 1989, 19), there is the Turners' wretched dwelling:

He looked up at the bare crackling tin of the roof, that was warped with the sun, at the faded gimcrack furniture, at the dusty brick floors covered with ragged animal skins, and wondered how those two, Mary and Dick Turner, could have borne to live in such a place, year in year out, for so long. [...] Why did they go on without even so much as putting in ceilings? It was enough to drive anyone mad, the heat in this place. (Lessing 1989, 28)

As one can see, it is not merely Eliot's smothering and oppressively hot atmosphere that is taken over by Lessing but the spatial arrangement as well. Furthermore, the cottage can also be viewed as a representative of colonialism (Roberts 2003, 135), which allows for a bodily interpretation: the abandoned house

in the middle of the African desert is the corpse of the coloniser defeated by nature and the enormous infinity of the surrounding African landscape. Lessing shows and describes Africa according to the European tradition with the white coloniser in the centre and the continent seen with his eyes. Nevertheless, she already indicates that Africa has two faces: that of a hostile and violent land and that of an intact, if not immaculate place, mostly represented by Moses, the Turners' servant (Bertelsen 1991, 650).

This double representation can be found in Le Clézio's novel as well, who despite being a white coloniser just like Lessing's protagonists, opts for the indigenous people's perspective. For him, Africa is almost inseparable from its inhabitants and he constructs it as an enormous palpating body, full of life. When he arrives in Africa with his father at the age of eight, the first perceptions and eventual discovery of his own self are entangled with his magical initiation into this mysterious continent: "[...] it was an absolute freedom of body and mind. In front of the house, in the opposite direction from the hospital where my father worked, a horizonless space started, with a swift undulation where one could lose sight"² (Le Clézio 2004, 19).

Contrary to Lessing, here, the African experience is not restricted to a closed up space like the cottage of Mary and Dick Turner or to the suffocating infinity of the landscape. The horizon seen by the young Le Clézio possesses only positive attributes, which can partly be attributed to the youthful enthusiasm and naivety of the child author. However, in a previous essay of his, *The Material Ecstasy* [*L'extase matérielle*], published in 1967, Le Clézio already declares that it is in fact the material (or in other words the flesh) that represents true reality, not the intellectual spirit: "Body is life, spirit is death. Material is being, intellect is nothingness. And the absolute secret of thinking is without doubt this never-forgotten desire to plunge into the most ecstatic fusion with material [...]"³ (Le Clézio 1967, 37).

Behind these somewhat hazy words lies the basic conceit of *The African*: this double representation of body and spirit reflects on the basic dichotomy of coloniser and colonised, which traditionally connects the body with the inhabitants of the continent and the spirit (or intellect) with the white settlers. Moreover, it is

² "[...] c'était la liberté totale du corps et de l'esprit. Devant la maison, dans la direction opposée à l'hôpital où travaillait mon père, commençait une étendue sans horizon, avec une légère ondulation où le regard pouvait se perdre." All of Le Clézio's texts are presented here in my translation.

³ "Le corps est vie, l'esprit est mort. La matière est être, l'intellect néant. Et le secret absolu de la pensée est sans doute ce désir jamais oublié de se replonger dans la plus extatique fusion avec la matière." The juxtaposition between "being" and "nothingness" is strangely reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* where the French terms "être" and "néant" are precisely echoed in Le Clézio's essay. The comparison is all the more fitting since one of the major tenets of Sartre's book is the assertion of existence over essence, which seems to be very similar to the main idea behind *The Material Ecstasy* as well.

the body that receives all the positive attributes, particularly in Le Clézio's case who even talks about some sort of carnal desire of being united with the African body and of experiencing the "material ecstasy" of the land. Thus, as opposed to Lessing, Le Clézio's Africa can be best grasped in terms of its infiniteness and the freedom it offers.

Furthermore, in Lessing's case, the above-mentioned dichotomy can rather be interpreted in terms of postcolonial criticism with a strong juxtaposition between the originally vast African space and the small, scattered towns built by the white settlers. Even though the centre of Le Clézio's work is not the colonisers' world, there are some examples of this distinction, based on value judgments made most frequently by the father's character. The almost ecstatic experiences of the young Le Clézio are born of the fact that his father detests colonialism and is strongly convinced that the true image of Africa cannot be known in its colonial representation, that is, "the civilised zone" does not show the truth of Africa (Roussel-Gillet 2011, 92). The majority of the colonisers are only familiar with this zone but Le Clézio's father is one of the few who dares to penetrate the reality of Africa and, consequently, sees how the traces of the British and French occupation still weigh on the land and its people.

2. The appearance of bodies⁴

Despite all this, there are very few direct reflections on the effects of colonisation in Le Clézio's novel. It is rather an irresistible sensation for the African land, particularly in relation to the body that is in the centre of his work. In *The African* everything is interpretable in bodily terms, not only space but the characters as well. The primary difference between Lessing's and Le Clézio's novels rests on the choice of the protagonists: while the French writer's eight-year-old self and his friends represent a childlike point of view, Mary and Dick Turner's life chronicles the imminent decline of the colonisers' reign.

Le Clézio shows the very beginning of the colonial experience where all the emotions bear a sense of novelty and a positive connotation. The author's body merges with the body of Africa and even the tedious incidents become places of apprenticeship and perpetual fascination:

Africa, it was the body, rather than the face. It was the violence of sensations, the violence of appetites, the violence of seasons. The first memory I have of this continent is my body covered with an eruption of small bulbs caused by the extreme heat, a benign affliction of the Whites who suffer from it when

⁴ The title of this chapter is taken from *The African* where the phrase "l'apparition des corps" at the beginning of the novel basically summarises Le Clézio's main perceptions of Africa.

they enter the equatorial zone, and which is comically called “bourbouille” – in English, *prickly heat*.⁵ (Le Clézio 2004, 16)

Le Clézio's light illness is presented as something benign which greatly contributes to the development of this ungraspable experience. It is not only the continent and the land which become one enormous body, the human beings are also reduced to the status of one huge living and sensual body. However, this “reduction” is not a negatively described process. On the contrary, the fact that people in Le Clézio's life are deprived of their individuality shows a return to the very beginning where the differences between coloniser and colonised did not yet exist and where everyone was one body.

This sentiment is further accentuated when the protagonist notices an old woman who had fainted in the middle of the street. Like all children, he is curious to know what has happened to the woman and more particularly why she is so different from other people: “The naked body of this woman, made of folds and wrinkles, her skin like flat goatskin, her saggy, flabby breasts, hanging on her stomach, her cracked skin, tarnished, a bit grey, all this seems strange to me but at the same time true”⁶ (Le Clézio 2004, 15). It is interesting that instead of pity and disgust, Le Clézio “feels [...] love and interest”⁷ (15). It indicates that in Africa, even old and hideous bodies are worth the same as young and healthy ones and belong to the community just as much as any other body. This distinction is all the more important since so far the young Le Clézio has only encountered intact female bodies “exempt of the illness of age”⁸ (15). This difference between European and African ideology and way of life will be fundamental in the discussion about violence as well.

The characters' image in Lessing's novel is almost contrary to Le Clézio's representation. Mary Turner's body greatly resembles the presentation of the African space: she is dry and frigid, truly reduced to the status of a simple body: “Hatless under the blazing sun with the thick cruel rays pouring on to her back and shoulders, numbing and dulling her, she sometimes felt as if she were bruised all over, as if the sun had bruised her flesh to a tender swollen covering for aching

⁵ “L’Afrique, c’était le corps plutôt que le visage. C’était la violence des sensations, la violence des appétits, la violence des saisons. Le premier souvenir que j’ai de ce continent, c’est mon corps couvert d’une éruption de petites ampoules causées par l’extrême chaleur, une affection bénigne dont souffrent les Blancs à leur entrée dans la zone équatoriale, sous le nom comique de «bourbouille» – en anglais *prickly heat*.”

⁶ “Le corps nu de cette femme, fait de plis, de rides, sa peau comme une outre dégonflée, ses seins allongés et flasques, pendant sur son ventre, sa peau craquelée, ternie, un peu grise, tout cela me semble étrange, et en même temps vrai.”

⁷ “ressentai[t] [...] l’amour et de l’intérêt”

⁸ “exempts de la maladie de l’âge”

bones” (Lessing 1989, 148). Note how Mary’s “aching bones” are reminiscent of Eliot’s “dry bones.”

Under the devouring sun, she loses her individuality and becomes a simple container, perpetually tormented by the heat and the unbearable circumstances of the continent. We can see the same corporal reduction as in the case of *The African*: Mary loses her individuality and is eventually assimilated into the infinite space and finally becomes the equivalent of the land itself. The reduction, which in Le Clézio’s case had an entirely positive connotation, designates here a process of loss, a decline which is strongly influenced by the environment surrounding the protagonists.

Similarly, the bodies so much admired by Le Clézio are despised and looked down on by Mary Turner:

If she disliked native men, she loathed the women. She hated the exposed fleshiness of them, their soft brown bodies and soft bashful faces that were also insolent and inquisitive and their chattering voices that held a brazen fleshy undertone. [...] Above all, she hated the way they suckled their babies, with their breasts hanging down for everyone to see; there was something in their calm satisfied maternity that made her blood boil. ‘Their babies hanging on to them like leeches,’ she said to herself shuddering, for she thought with horror of suckling a child. The idea of a child’s lips on her breasts made her feel quite sick [...] they were alien and primitive creatures with ugly desires she could not bear to think about. (Lessing 1989, 94–95)

Mary’s pure repulsion towards African women is in fact a mixture of fascination and disgust stemming from her own desires which she refuses to accept as her own.⁹ Over the years Mary becomes more and more feeble and sickly until the moment when this physical deterioration begins to affect her mental health as well. Her decline has a double face: it is not merely her body that is slowly becoming empty but also her brain. Her only link with the rest of the world is her servant, Moses who recalls Le Clézio’s sensual figures, whose bodies somehow stay immaculate. For a long time it is only when looking at Moses that Mary seems once more attached to the real world: “She used to sit quite still, watching him work. The powerful, broad-built body fascinated her. [...] He was rubbing his thick neck with soap, and the white lather was startlingly white against the black skin” (Lessing 1989, 142–143). Moses’ body once again recalls the bodies of Le Clézio:

⁹ Frampton mentions that Kristeva’s idea of the *abject* describes Mary’s position very adequately (2009,19). The abject is that which is both part of the self and that which is rejected and projected outside onto another object so that the repulsion or even fear one feels towards an alien being is in fact that part of the self that has been exiled. Similarly, Mary’s disgust of the fleshiness and nudity of naked women stems from her own desire, first for more liberty, then for a child of her own.

lively and sensual but at the same time dangerous. Moreover, this body represents the black body *par excellence*, which can be perceived as something strange and at the same time as something which is completely natural: Moses is in this sense not an individual but a substitute for Mary for everything that she has missed and is missing from her experience of Africa.

However, the body of Moses is not entirely like the bodies of Le Clézio: he has already been contaminated by the destructive environment of Rhodesia and has seemingly lost the purity which Le Clézio hails so affectionately. "His face wickedly malevolent" (Lessing 1989, 187) looks at the world with a silent fury and with what is perceived to be a desire for vengeance. But by whom is Moses perceived to be evil? The question of focalisation is of crucial importance here since as the novel proceeds, we are increasingly locked up in Mary's head and we are forced to see everything from her perspective which is obviously that of a white coloniser and a desperate woman. Thus, even though Moses is initially perceived as all the other black servants (simple-minded, benevolent and even gracious), there is a suffocating force in him as well, just like in the African space.

Chung (2001, 111) accentuates that the term 'ek-tasy' originally denotes one's positioning and eventual transformation *outside* of oneself, thus achieving true material ecstasy. For this reason, Mary remains forever incapable of the ecstatic, joyful experience of Africa Le Clézio's younger self indulges in simply because she is inevitably locked up in her own head and never moves outside of it. For this reason, Rubenstein claims that the "outer hell is the counterpart or even the projection of inner hell" (1979, 17), marking the sadly hopeless position of Mary. Thus, both in *The Grass Is Singing* and *The African*, there is a reduction of bodies to spatial entities but while Le Clézio essentially writes about being united with Africa in a collective experience which excludes nothing and no-one, Lessing talks about a loss of individuality and eventually of life with the slow process of closing up in Mary's head. This power which is transferred from space and nature to the inhabitants finally manifests in violence, one of the most important attributes of Africa.

3. The emergence of violence

Violence and brutality have their very deep roots not only in the mentality of the inhabitants but in their land as well. Lessing writes that "Anger, violence, death, seemed natural to this vast, harsh country" (1989, 19). Le Clézio also shows that violence is a necessary and innate attribute of Africa but in Lessing's case, this theme becomes even more refined. The white settlers are furious because of the harsh circumstances of African life and because they are forced day by day to be in contact with the indigenous people whom they clearly regard as their inferiors. On the other hand, it is only illusory that the same indigenous people meekly accept

their subjugation because there is always a small residue of bitterness that has the capacity of pushing them towards violence. Thus, there are two sides to the development of violence: that of the colonisers and that of the colonised.

The source of violent actions is most frequently fear. The white colonisers are brutal with their indigenous servants and workers because they are subconsciously or not so subconsciously afraid of them but this feeling finds its origins in a projection of their own selves. Thus, Mary is instinctively afraid of Moses: "She stood rigid with fear, the chill sweat running down her body, waiting. He approached slowly, obscene and powerful, and it was not only he, but her father who was threatening her" (Lessing 1989, 165). This sentiment is once again reminiscent of Mary's general attitude towards the natives of Africa: they represent that part of the European which she rejects due to fear or disgust, and which will eventually lead to violent actions.

Moses initially works on the farm and when he becomes the Turners' household servant, Mary is already decrepit and physically and intellectually feeble. Her hatred towards Moses and all the blacks of Africa becomes a profound fear which pushes her into a subjugated position: Moses ceases to be a simple domestic servant; he practically becomes the guardian and benevolent parent of Mary. The scene where he dresses Mary shows that he has an absolute power over this weak and almost childlike woman. However, it is not until the very end of the story when he kills his mistress that violence actually emerges in him. Until this tragic moment he wins all his battles with patience and the occasional manipulation of this broken spirit. One still has to remark that Mary's murder, even if it is a profoundly violent act, is also a liberating one whose aim is to deliver this woman from her earthly sufferings. Thus, in *The Grass Is Singing*, it is the coloniser's turn to become subjugated and powerless.

Yet, the connection between violence and fear is much more complicated than the novel's story seems to suggest. This is very well shown in the scene where Mary and Moses meet for the first time. Dick is home sick and his wife is forced to go to the farm to supervise the work of the blacks but evidently she does not have as much authority as Dick and the workers stay lazy and unyielding. There is one particularly insolent black who continues to address her in a mockingly confident English. In her frustration and impotence, she hits him across the face with a whip. Sometime later, she is horrified to discover that Dick has chosen this same black man to be their new "boy." Starting with this incident, Mary lives in a vicious circle: she had committed this act of violence but she was immediately afraid of an equally violent retribution from the man who is obviously much bigger than she is. Her motivation to hit one of the workers was the fear of losing her authority but the consequence was also fear, which will keep pushing her towards newer and newer acts of violence.

In *The African*, violence rather emerges as an abstract but necessary attribute of the continent. We meet it in children's tales either told to the young Le Clézio or

invented by him and his friends. Apart from being profoundly incorporated into the very fabric of Africa, violence has no negative connotations as in the case of Lessing where the desperation and pointlessness of violence are closely related to the representation of space and the inhabitants. In Le Clézio's novel, violence is honest and open without those physical attributes which render it so sickly and devastating in *The Grass Is Singing*. It is rather described as an omnipresent and omnipotent power which appears in all that is related to Africa: nature and man equally.

I remember the violence. Not a secret, hypocritical, terrorising violence which all those children who are born in the middle of a war know. [...] That violence wasn't really physical. [...] It was deaf and hidden like an illness. Ogoja gave me another violence, open and real which made my body vibrate. It was visible in every detail of life and in the surrounding nature.¹⁰ (Le Clézio 2004, 19–20)

At first, this kind of violence is intangible and incomprehensible for the child Le Clézio because it greatly differs from what he had experienced in his previous life. Very much like in the case of the old woman, he feels an almost impenetrable distinction between the African and the European notions of violence. He says that “few Europeans knew this feeling”¹¹ (2004, 21), with which he positions himself among the true Africans who truly know this feeling and experience it without themselves becoming violent. The primary difference between the representation of violence in Le Clézio's and Lessing's case can be found in the position of this sensation, that is, in the distinction between individuality and collectivity. While in *The Grass Is Singing* violence is an individual feeling (even if it has collective implications connected to colonialism), in *The African*, violence can be found almost exclusively in human communities and in the space as an organising force.

However, there is an individual side to violence in *The African* as well. When Le Clézio speaks of his personal experiences he says that “Africa was powerful. For the child I was, violence was general, indisputable. It gave me enthusiasm”¹² (2004, 21). Even if he perceives violence as a general and incontestable phenomenon, the feelings that this presence incites in him are completely unique to him. His discovery of the African land also implicates a process of initiation into violence which will

¹⁰ “Je me souviens de la violence. Non pas une violence secrète, hypocrite, terrorisante comme celle que connaissent tous les enfants qui naissent au milieu d'une guerre [...] Cette violence-là n'était pas vraiment physique. Elle était sourde et cachée comme une maladie. [...] Ogoja me donnait une autre violence, ouverte, réelle, qui faisait vibrer mon corps. C'était visible dans chaque détail de la vie et de la nature environnante”

¹¹ “Peu d'Européens ont connu ce sentiment.”

¹² “L'Afrique était puissante. Pour l'enfant que j'étais, a violence était générale, indiscutable. Elle donnait de l'enthousiasme.”

necessarily differ from the “sentimental education” he could have received among the Europeans. His rite of passage contributes to the collective experience of violence but, at the same time, it is also restrained to him since such rites of passage are singular. Ultimately, despite all its negative attributes, violence clearly designates a process of development in Le Clézio’s case, while in Lessing’s novel, it is a process which leads to the total decline of life.

As we have seen, the difference between these two representations of Africa is perceptible on several levels. On the one hand, it seems that spatial images are inseparable from bodily images which reflect the traditional (colonial) dichotomical organisation of body and mind. However, in the uniqueness of point of view, and later in the various manifestations of violence, it seems that we are moving towards a postcolonial interpretation. Lessing’s and Le Clézio’s works seem to complement each other in the sense that they both present a postcolonial criticism of the colonial order, yet they do this in distinct, even opposing ways. While Lessing shows the devastating reality of white colonisation, Le Clézio gives a positive reading of the perspective of the colonised, which is essentially a childlike happiness, often depicted in colonial discourse as simple-mindedness and even stupidity. These two contrasting but complementary images, then, give us a thorough picture of the past and present of colonisation, with possible repercussions for its future.

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