

Crisis and Reconstruction: The Way out of Ecological Dilemma in Doris Lessing's *The Old Chief Mshlanga*

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Abstract

The Old Chief Mshlanga is a short story written by Doris Lessing who is the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007, which is based on the traditional realistic narrative techniques, and takes the African colonial life as the background to highlight the ecological aftermaths caused by colonial oppression and white racial superiority. The ecological value orientation conveyed by the short story coincides with the core of postcolonial ecocriticism. So this paper mainly aims at analyzing the root causes, crisis and reconstruction of ecological dilemma contained in the context through the postcolonial ecocriticism, exploring Lessing's racial concerns and ecological ideas, and emphasizing the key role of harmonious ecological environment and equal and independent racial relations in the process of realizing social justice and environmental justice.

Key words: Doris Lessing; *The Old Chief Mshlanga*; Postcolonial ecocriticism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing is reputed as the greatest female writer after Virginia Woolf. In her writing career of more than 50 years, she puts her concerns about human issues into her works. The Swedish Academy of Literature praised Lessing "that epic of the female experience, who with scholarship, And fire vision power has been subjected to a divided civilization to scrutinizing". Lessing believes that novels should be a political literary form that reflects pressing social problems, and the writer's task is to ask questions and inspire readers to think. She hopes her works can give readers a stormy literary shock.

Therefore, she has been tirelessly searching, thinking and paying attention to racial contradictions, ecological damage, war crisis, gender relations and other issues all her life. Among them, "Throughout her writing career for more than half a century, the ecological problem is not only the basic point of her writing thought, but also an important dimension throughout her literary creation" (Shan 6). In *The Old Chief Mshlanga*, Lessing examines and reflects on the apartheid oppression and ecological plunder and destruction of African colonies from the perspective of a white girl.

Scholars at home and abroad have also incisively captured Lessing's forward-looking concern for ecological issues and interpreted her works in an ecological way. However, academia's vision mainly focuses on Lessing's representative novel *The Grass Is Singing*. As a short story of Lessing's early creation stage, *The Old Chief Mshlanga*'s interpretation perspectives are mostly based on narrative structure and colonialism, which does not occupy a place in ecological analysis. Therefore, starting from the postcolonial ecocriticism, this paper analyzes and studies the destruction of natural ecology and alienation of spiritual ecology in African colonies shown in the short story, so as to reveal the significance of rebuilding harmonious ecological and racial concepts,

respecting and embracing all ethnic civilizations and reconstructing harmonious natural environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many of Lessing's early works are based on her early experiences in southern Africa.

I believe that the chief gift from Africa to writers, white and black, is the continent itself, its presence which for some people is like an old fever, latent always in their blood; or like an old wound throbbing in the bones as the air changes.....Africa gives you the knowledge that man is a small creature, among other creatures, in a large landscape. (Lessing, 2003, p.7)

The Old Chief Mshlanga is a true portrayal of Lessing's memory of African life. At present, the relevant materials at home and abroad are mainly concentrated in comparative analysis, narrative perspective and colonial criticism. However, due to its early publication date, the research results are not fruitful, and the ecological dimension displayed in the book has not attracted much attention.

2.1 Research Abroad

The Old Chief Mshlanga is usually compiled into a collection of short stories together with that of Lessing's other African themes due to its short length, which caused that there are few detailed research results on this work. Foreign studies mostly proceed from the perspective of linguistics and pedagogy, and dig deep into the realistic value of this short story.

Professor Mark Bracher, in his monograph *Educating for Cosmopolitanism* published in 2013, makes a comparative study of Lessing's *The Old Chief Mshlanga* and Voltaire's *Candide* from the perspective of cognition and pedagogy.

Among them, "Developing Metacognition of Ethnocentrism with Lessing's *The Old Chief Mshlanga* and Voltaire's *Candide*" starts from metacognition and ethnocentrism cognition, and holds that Lessing's work describes the cause, operation, consequence and process of correcting ethnocentrism cognition, while *Candide* provides many examples of ethnocentrism distorting self and others. By explaining these examples of ethnocentrism information processing, teachers can help students form their racial cognition and understanding. "Correcting Faulty General Person-schemas With *Things Fall Apart*, *The Old Chief Mshlanga* and *Candide*" takes the text as an example to explore its faulty general person-schemas, so as to avoid this wrong schema practice in the teaching process.

In 2017, Isik Sevcan's "A Semiotic Analysis of *The Old Chief Mshlanga* Based on Greimas's Narrative Semiotics" explores the abstract meaning of the text from the surface to the deep from three aspects: narrative, discursive and logical-semantic.

2.2 Research in China

Domestic academia mostly focus on Lessing's novels, and *The Old Chief Mshlanga* doesn't attract much attention. Narrative perspective and colonial criticism have become the focus of the short story. The earliest journal paper is Tong Xiaolan's "The Pilots in the Process of Initiation-an Interpretation of Doris Lessing's *The Old Chief Mshlanga*" in 2007. Starting with Mordecai Marcus's growth theory, she analyzes the influence that Nkosikaas is subjected to on the growth of colonial consciousness. Thereafter, she published the paper "An Analysis of the Perspectives in *The Old Chief Mshlanga*" from the narrative point of view in 2008. Similarly, Chen Jingjing's "An Analysis of the Colonialism in *The Old Chief Mshlanga* from the Perspective of Narratology" in 2018 also takes narrative perspective and narrative voice as the starting point to explore colonialism in it.

The only paper in China that integrates ecological elements is Wang Zhenping and Dai Zhaofeng's "An Ecological Discourses Analysis of Doris Lessing's *The Old Chief Mshlanga* from the Perspective of System Function" in 2019. The paper starts with emotion, appreciation and judgment, makes discourse analysis of the text, and reveals Lessing's value orientation on ecological issues. It takes white girls as the research carrier, focusing on social oppression and spiritual rule, but what is the fly in the ointment is that there is not much on natural ecological problems, and does not involve the research of racial resistance and ecological reconstruction. Consequently, this paper makes up for this deficiency to a certain extent.

3. POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM

"Clearly, there are grounds here for a productive overlap between the tasks of ecocriticism and those of postcolonial criticism, opportunities for a fruitful alliance between the two critical theoretical schools that opens up new aesthetic horizons, as well as offering food for political thought" (Huggan 64). As early as 2008, Graham Huggan, a postcolonial critic, began to pay attention to ecological issues with a vision beyond postcolonial criticism. It is believed that there is an overlapping space between postcolonial criticism and ecological criticism, namely postcolonial ecocriticism.

Huggan's thinking has also been echoed by academia. Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt wrote in their editor-in-chief *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives* that:

postcolonial green scholarship must define itself not as a narrow theoretical discourse but as a relatively inclusive methodological framework that is responsive to ongoing political and ecological problems and to diverse kinds of texts. No particular approach or methodology can fit all cultural contexts or geographies, but any text, we suggest, can profitably be read from a postcolonial green perspective. (Roos and Hunt, 2010, p.9)

Obviously, Roos and Hunt tried to examine both sides from the perspective of transcending postcolonial criticism and ecological criticism, so as to explore various issues in the political and ecological fields.

After that, in 2011, Huggan and Tiffin collaborated to compile *Postcolonial Ecocriticism; Literature, Animals, Environment*, a theoretical masterpiece, can be regarded as the foundation work of postcolonial ecocriticism. This theory is systematically expounded and illustrated. In this book, they put forward that between nature and culture, and between animals and humans are the first problems to be investigated. "Postcolonial ecocriticism should pay attention to the imperialist hegemony and racial ideology behind the changes of local ecosystems, criticize the ecological imperialism among them, and rethink the relationship between man, animals and the environment" (Jiang 90).

The research paradigm of postcolonial ecocriticism can be divided into two categories: critical research of ecological imperialism and research of environmental ethics. The former criticizes the western deformed thoughts of speciesism and racism. Western colonists regard nature and animals as the "other" other than human beings, and must serve human beings. The latter, from a historical point of view, responds to the long-standing problem of land occupation and destruction in the colonies.

For this reason, as a transcendental criticism paradigm, postcolonial ecocriticism points its finger at the development doctrine in the process of human history, criticizes the hegemonic rule and oppression of the race, culture, nature and animals of the third world by the West in the name of civilization, and proposes to construct ethnic justice, ethical justice and environmental justice.

Based on the postcolonial ecological theory and its two paradigms, this paper analyzes and reflects on the natural ecology and humanistic ecology of African continent in the novel.

4. ROOT— WESTERN DEFORMED ANTHROPOCENTRISM THOUGHT

The natural ecological problems are accompanied by the imbalance of human ecology. The rationality-centered culture prevailing in the west for thousands of years is not only the root of racism and speciesism, but also the philosophical basis of speciesism that regards animals and aborigines as "the other" by overemphasizing the cultural superiority of human rationality. "Based on this hegemonic rational cultural logic, the colonists of the European Empire found a seemingly justified reason for their aggression and colonization. In the sense of colonial ideology, anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism are inseparable and unified concepts" (Miao 201). Under the influence of this hegemonic thought, the western colonists

have already internalized this into daily ideology, treated other races condescendingly in a self-centered way, and even excluded other races from the category of human beings based on rationality:

As Plumwood argues, the western definition of humanity depended – and still depends – on the presence of the 'not-human': the uncivilised, the animal and animalistic. European justification for invasion and colonisation proceeded from this basis, understanding non-European lands and the people and animals that inhabited them as 'spaces', 'unused, underused or empty' (53).

In the colonial history, the white colonists often reduced the indigenous people to animals to rationalize their colonial actions in order to achieve the goal of complete conquest. Animals and lower ethnic groups should make sacrifices for the development and progress of "mankind":

The very ideology of colonisation is thus one where anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism are inseparable, with the anthropocentrism underlying Eurocentrism being used to justify those forms of European colonialism that see 'indigenous cultures as "primitive", less rational, and closer to children, animals and nature' (Huggan and Tiffin 5).

When this ideology envelopes the colonial land, the ecological environment and the life rights are trampled at the same time.

The former focuses on the land ownership in the third world countries and whether the land is rationally developed and utilized, which is the environmental ethical issue emphasized in the postcolonial ecocriticism. Robert P. Marzec traced back the enclosure complex of the western colonists to *Robinson Crusoe* which reflected the Enclosure Movement in British history, and proposed that "we must therefore reawaken an ontological understanding of land" (2). Only when the colonial subjects control the land can they establish their sovereign consciousness and construct their subjective consciousness of taking the land as the "other". Africa is sparsely populated, which provides a convenient condition for greedy colonists to accumulate capital. Large areas of uncultivated plough land and grasslands are illegally seized by white people and taken for their own. "They were good, the years of ranging the bush over her father's farm which, like every white farm, was largely unused, broken only occasionally by small patches of cultivation." (Lessing, 2003, p.11). They even deceive themselves as well as others to rename the aboriginal land to "held no implication of usurped ownership".

On the other hand, the occupation of African land is not only material plunder, but also spiritual blasphemy for the aborigines. All living things have become available resources. African aborigines, defined as slaves of white colonists, loses their right to speak and became unspeakable "other". No matter from social status or ideological will, they all become vassals of European nations. "In assuming a natural prioritisation of humans

and human interests over those of other species on earth, we are both generating and repeating the racist ideologies of imperialism on a planetary scale" (Huggan and Tiffin 6).

Western colonists are loyal practitioners of such erroneous ideologies, and treat blacks as slaves or even the object of arbitrary beating and scolding. "The child was taught to take them for granted: the servants in the house would come running a hundred yards to pick up a book if she dropped it" (Lessing, 2003, p.12).

They have no dignity, no personality, and no right to talk to white people on an equal footing. "It was even impossible to think of the black people who worked about the house as friends, for if she talked to one of them, her mother would come running anxiously: 'Come away; you mustn't talk to natives'" (Lessing, 2003, p.12). When an aborigine doesn't give way immediately when he meets a white man, it is regarded as "cheek". When he walks normally on the road, white children will treat him as the object of a prank:

On the rare occasions when white children met together they could amuse themselves by hailing a passing native in order to make a buffoon of him; they could set the dogs on him and watch him run; they could tease a small black child as if he were a puppy – save that they would not throw stones and sticks at a dog without a sense of guilt (Lessing, 2003, p.12).

Under the social background of complete imbalance of humanistic ecology, the lack of long-term education, brainwashing of white centralism, and ideological infiltration of unnecessary existence of inferior ethnic groups have made African aborigines gradually lose their pursuit of thought freedom and national liberation, and they have completely become "uncivilized" and "benighted" other to be driven by colonists.

5. CRISIS—THE ELEGY OF NATURE AND LIFE UNDER ECOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM

Enclosure mode has prepared a method for European and American countries to expand in the colonial world territory. Influenced by this hegemonic occupation, Nkosikaas, a British girl who grew up in Africa, takes it for granted that this land is owned by white people. She walks out of the farm with a shotgun and hunting dogs without any fear, because this is the "white man's territory" and she has the right to freely control and dominate this land and any resources on it.

Meanwhile, enclosure is accompanied by the rampant plundering and destruction of land, the trampling of animal survival rights, the growing colonial cultural order, and the domestication and enslavement of indigenous people. The occupation of land, the suppression and discrimination against blacks are just the beginning of

colonial plunder and rule. What follows is a series of ecological consequences and social crises.

When Nkosikaas first came to the area outside of the farm boundary, she was amazed at the magnificence of this land which had not been reclaimed by white people. "I had entered a completely fresh type of landscape. It was a wide green valley, where a small river sparkled, and vivid water-birds darted over the rushes. The grass was thick and soft to my calves, the trees stood tall and shapely" (Lessing, 2003, p.17). In her cognition, the African continent should be like her father's wild and desolate farm which afflicted with wounds of all descriptions. "I was used to our farm, whose hundreds of acres of harsh eroded soil bore trees that had been cut for the mine furnaces and had grown thin and twisted, where the cattle had dragged the grass flat, leaving innumerable criss-crossing trails that deepened each season into gullies, under the force of the rains" (Lessing, 2003, p.18). Driven by capitalist interests, the vitality of this fertile land has been exhausted. Lessing presents the real land ecology of Africa from the first perspective with sharp brushstrokes, and points out that the underlying imperial expansion and geographical violence are the fundamental reasons for the destruction of the land ecology.

Similarly, people's plundering of the environment often coexists with the plundering of society. American scholar Murray Bookchin once made a famous assertion: "Intertwined with the social crisis is a crisis that has emerged directly from man's exploitation of the planet" (18). When the natural ecology is destroyed, then the life bodies living on this land will not end well either. The essence of colonialism lies in conquest. After occupying land and grabbing resources, western colonists set their eyes on the animal kingdom. In the colonial context, the members of the animal kingdom include not only wild animals, but also indigenous people who are in a disadvantaged and marginalized position.

By killing colonial animals wantonly, the colonists showed the strength of the supreme empire and shocked the indigenous people's rebels. At the same time, in order to establish the dominant position of the white people, the colonists usually excluded the aborigines from the category of 'human being', thus providing a discourse basis for killing and enslaving the aborigines" (Jiang and Meng, 2013, p.71)

Jacques Derrida, the representative of deconstruction, called it "noncriminal putting to death' of other humans as well by marking them as animal" (Wolfe 7).

In the story, Nkosikaas often carries a shotgun and two dogs for hunting activities. As she grows older, her curiosity can no longer be satisfied near the farm. She starts to climb over hills to explore an unknown land, but she is not afraid. "the dogs and the gun were an armour against fear". The gun is not only a tool for her to kill animals, but also a discourse symbol to show the power and status of white people. After mastering the absolute

right to the survival of animals, the western colonists shift their vision and concern to the aborigines. In their eyes, the blacks of African tribes were all “raw black savages” and “damned niggers”.

It is an important thinking paradigm of colonialism and imperialism to reduce racial “others” to animals. “Following Jacques Derrida, Tiffin suggests that the category of ‘human’ appears to require some kind of sacrifice of the ‘animal’, an institutionalised speciesism that has been used to justify the mistreatment or even slaughter not just of animals, but of other, putatively ‘lower-order’ humans as well” (Becket & Gifford, 2007, p.166).

Speciesism is unable to handle the relationship between human beings and animals fairly, and racism fails to handle the relationship between different races correctly. They domesticate their thoughts to make blacks crawl at their feet, depriving them of their political rights and personal freedom. As a vulnerable group, the aborigines are forced to submit to this kind of overwhelming hegemony under the absolute suppression of advanced industrial weapons. “They were an amorphous black mass, mingling and thinning and massing like tadpoles, faceless, who existed merely to serve, to say ‘Yes, Baas,’ take their money and go” (Lessing, 2003, p.12).

They leaves their homes, away from their tribes and families, just for the meager income. “Perhaps even as far away as the fabled gold mines of Johannesburg, where the pay was so much better than the few shillings a month and the double handful of mealie meal twice a day which they earned in that part of Africa” (Lessing, 2003, p.12). In their view, these African aborigines are no different from the animals on the prairie. They are all inferior tools used to serve the white people, and there is no need to provide material and living conditions. Black people’s dwelling palace is even “a dirty and neglected place, a temporary home for migrants who had no roots in it” (Lessing, 2003, p.19).

The double exploitation and oppression of politics and economy have led to unprecedented destruction of African humanistic ecosystem. The white colonists have long forgotten the kindness and benevolence conveyed in the Bible, and they have scattered all their original sins on this innocent African continent.

6. RECONSTRUCTION—DAWN OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Said believes that “To think about distant places, to colonize them, to populate or depopulate them: all of this occurs on, about, or because of land. The actual geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about.”(Said 78). Therefore, if the

aborigines want to get rid of the colonial consciousness and reconstruct their identity, they must start with the land.

This tranquil and peaceful land gives birth to the indigenous people’s harmonious and orderly view of natural ecology. They adhere to the symbiotic concept that man is an integral part of nature, and integrate themselves into nature as a part of the earth. Before the invasion of western colonists, this land was not affected by the industrial revolution of the world, and it still follows the traditional mode of production, which takes it from nature and uses it for nature. The black tribes and villages are like a paradise independent of the world, with no trace of white invasion, and still retain the living habits and simple folk customs of primitive villages. The ecological environment presents a harmonious picture:

It was a cluster of thatched huts in a clearing among trees. There were neat patches of mealies and pumpkins and millet, and cattle grazed under some trees at a distance. Fowls scratched among the huts, dogs lay sleeping on the grass, and goats friezed a kopje that jutted up beyond a tributary of the river lying like an enclosing arm round the village (Lessing, 2003, p.18).

Moreover, Postcolonial ecocriticism points out that the western hegemonic centrism thought is not only the psychological motivation for European imperial countries to colonize the world, but also the failure of human beings to correctly locate the ecological relationship with the non-human world such as environment and animals, resulting in the deterioration of the global ecological environment. This ideological and cultural pattern has been internalized as a daily ideology of white people.

Nkosikaas’s colonial education and racial order makes her regard “all natives as things to use” from an early age. Nevertheless, the meeting and acquaintance with the old chief Mshlanga begins to shake and subvert the traditional cognition of this white girl, which makes her hold in awe and veneration toward the solemn atmosphere and environment of Africa.

In the novel, the chief’s first appearance made Nkosikaas feel an indescribable oppression. When the old chief and his party met her on the road, “These had an air of dignity, of quietly following their own purpose. It was the dignity that checked my tongue.” (Lessing, 2003, p.13). For the first time, the pride and dignity of the old chief starts to shake Nkosikaas’s stereotype of blacks who are always servile and obedient, which makes her realize that black people and white people can talk politely and equally. “It seemed it was only necessary to let free that respect I felt when I was talking with old Chief Mshlanga, to let both black and white people meet gently, with tolerance for each other’s differences: it seemed quite easy.” (Lessing, 2003, p.15).

Something different seems to be silently influencing and changing this white girl. Instead of letting the hounds tease and intimidate the blacks on the road,

she will greet them. She also no longer feels strange, alienated and inaccessible to this land and its people, on the contrary:

slowly that other landscape in my mind faded, and my feet struck directly on the African soil, and I saw the shapes of tree and hill clearly, and the black people moved back, as it were, out of my life: it was as if I stood aside to watch a slow intimate dance of landscape and men, a very old dance, whose steps I could not learn. (Lessing, 2003, p.15)

Nkosikaas begins to appreciate the magnificent scenery of the boundless African continent from another perspective, admire passionate ancient civilization, and involuntarily get close to unaffected and kind people. Their close and friendly relationship with nature made her realize that no one can occupy this land alone, and everyone lives and develops under the protection of nature. "I was bred here; it is my country as well as the black man's country; and there is plenty of room for all of us, without elbowing each other off the pavements and roads." (Lessing, 2003, p.15).

The second meeting between the old chief and Nkosikaas is in the black tribe. In this meeting, the old chief still gives the girl due respect and welcomes her, but the elders, women and children in the tribe are full of vigilance and aloof from the white girl's sudden visit. In this hostile and antagonistic atmosphere, Nkosikaas has long forgotten that her original purpose of coming here is to visit the old chief and show her kindness; She stands still and doesn't know what to say, so she has to end the meeting hastily with a goodbye. On the way home, the originally tall and dense woods, fertile and vast green valleys, and winding and clear rivers all turn into indifferent, tough, gloomy and unyielding African guards. "it seemed to say to me: you walk here as a destroyer. I went slowly homewards, with an empty heart: I had learned that if one cannot call a country to heel like a dog, neither can one dismiss the past with a smile in an easy gush of feeling, saying: I could not help it, I am also a victim" (Lessing, 2003, p.20).

Under the guidance of Eurocentrism and racism, the western colonists reduced the black indigenous people to inferior and uncivilized animals, showing their status and cultural dimensions with the colonized people to realize cultural infiltration and ideological restraint.

But this deep-rooted colonial creed which lasted for generations shows signs of loosening and collapsing from the change of the white girl Nkosikaas. Her idea of harmonious coexistence between races and orderly ecological environment begins to sprout under the influence of the old chief. Although Nkosikaas is an individual case, there will be thousands of "Nkosikaas" in the future to reexamine the trauma and damage caused by the colonists to this land, redefine the communication mode and discourse mechanism between races, and reshape the healthy and orderly natural ecological

environment and equal and reciprocal race relations. And this exactly is the dawn of social justice and environmental justice in the third world countries.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper studies Doris Lessing's short story *The Old Chief Mshlanga* based on the postcolonial ecocriticism. Lessing not only reveals and criticizes the ecological destruction and racial discrimination in Africa, but also expresses an ultimate fantasy of realizing ecological harmony and racial equality one day through the perspective of Nkosikaas.

However, even today in the 21st century, colonial hegemony is still playing out. Environmental pollution, exploitation of resources and wanton discharge of industrial waste are still the most crucial ecological problems in the world. Wars, cultural appropriation, and invasion of western ideology have become the powerful manifestations of western neocolonialism.

Under such circumstances, Lessing's novel still has practical significance to alert the world, and the interpretation of the paradigm of postcolonial ecocriticism attributes the ecological destruction and its derived social problems directly to the colonial hegemony and anthropocentrism under western centralism. This paper peeps and analyzes Lessing's ecological ethics to reexamine the conceited and arrogant concepts about nature and species held by human beings in the postmodern era, and hopes to contribute to the construction of the universal ideal world of environmental justice and social justice depicted in Lessing's works.

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