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Cultivating Consciousness: Experiential Learning and Gendered Awakening in Doris Lessing's "Flavours of Exile"

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Abstract: Doris Lessing's centenary has reignited scholarly interest in her literary and philosophical contributions, particularly her nuanced engagement with education as a site of ideological resistance and personal transformation. This paper argues that Lessing's concern with informal, experiential learning, especially in the context of colonial Africa, was not incidental but central to her broader critique of patriarchal and colonial systems. Drawing on her African short stories as a primary corpus, this study focuses on "Flavours of Exile," in which a family's vegetable garden becomes a symbolic and literal space of learning. The narrative foregrounds the emotional and intellectual awakening of a young girl, whose engagement with nature, desire, and disappointment constitutes a form of gendered autonomy. Through postcolonial and feminist lenses, the story is read as a meditation on the limitations of formal colonial education and the liberatory potential of embodied, place-based learning. Lessing's portrayal of the female subject in transition, caught between inherited norms and emerging selfhood, offers a compelling vision of learning as liberation and gathering experience, where knowledge is not merely acquired but lived, resisted, and reclaimed.

Key words: experiential, learning, gender

"That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life but in a new way." – Doris Lessing

Introduction:

Doris Lessing's literary canon is marked by a persistent interrogation of societal structures, particularly those governing education, gender, and colonialism. Her African stories, written during her years in Southern Rhodesia, reflect a deep engagement with the lived realities of colonial subjects, especially women and children. Children recur as central figures throughout Lessing's oeuvre such as *African Stories*, *Children of Violence* series; *The Fifth Child*; *Ben, in the World*; *Love, Again;* and *The Sweetest Dream*, where Lessing illuminates the lingering imprints of trauma in the formative experiences of children and adolescents. Generally, the marks of both the violence of war and the failure of the communist dream that radically transforms social structures are the constant themes in Lessing's narrative. This is particularly visible in the lives of children whose past has been tainted by a historical violence transmitted through generations. Sperlinger in his book *Doris Lessing and Forming of History* argued that Lessing's concern for education is "intrinsic to Lessing's writing […] always about how we know the world, including the difficulty of learning to 'read' it (1). Her fiction thus develops in how it 'teaches' as well". Not surprisingly, Carrington's and Lessing's childhood education had some common elements, as both the painter and the writer left behind their formal education, family homes and countries in order to explore their personal and public artistic potential. In "Flavours of Exile", Lessing presents a narrative where learning unfolds not through institutional instruction but through emotional experience and environmental immersion. It sets the tone for an exploration of how exile, memory and lived experience converge to produce new understandings of self and society. This paper argues that Lessing's depiction of informal learning

challenges colonial and patriarchal paradigms, positioning experiential knowledge as a form of gendered autonomy and liberation.

Colonial Education and Its Discontents

Colonial education systems were designed to reproduce imperial ideologies and suppress indigenous and feminine subjectivities. Lessing's critique of these systems is evident in her portrayal of characters who learn through observation, emotion, and resistance rather than formal schooling. "Flavours of Exile," illustrates how the female adolescent protagonist tackles her experiences in the educational sphere of a colonial setting in the former Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Informal, contextual, constructivist and self-regulating learning processes come together as she engages with her sensations and feelings, which lead her to explore love, sensuality and family relationships. The complexities of colonial supremacy and the questioning of the beliefs involved in alternative political practices run parallel to these learning processes. In the story, the outer and the inner spaces are liminal spaces which are entangled both physically and metaphorically. In an anecdote in her autobiography *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949*, Lessing describes how a little tree plant would grow again and again from a crack in her bedroom floor in her African family home. Lessing's mother would repeatedly try to get rid of it, while Lessing saw it as a sign of nature's insistence that eventually the house would be naturally integrated into the bush within the vastness of the landscape (167). The protagonist's learning is shaped by her sensory engagement with the garden, her emotional investment in its produce, and her relational dynamics with family and outsiders. This aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call to decolonize the mind and Gayatri Spivak's critique of the subaltern's exclusion from dominant epistemologies.

The mother's nostalgia for European produce and gardening methods reflects the internalization of colonial values, while the daughter's embodied interaction with the African soil suggests a more rooted, hybrid identity. The story thus critiques the alienation produced by colonial education and gestures toward alternative pedagogies grounded in place and emotion.

The Garden as Pedagogical Space

The vegetable garden in "Flavours of Exile" serves as a metaphor for growth, experimentation, and emotional education. It is a space where the protagonist learns about care, disappointment, and desire- lessons that are absent from formal schooling. The garden resists commodification and control; it teaches through unpredictability and relationality.

With its fabulous soil, and watering well, the orchard produces not just fruit, but a quiet abundance—each tree a testament to care, each harvest a whisper of the earth's generosity. The roots stretch deep into memory, and the branches reach toward possibility, bearing gifts shaped by sun, soil, and the steady rhythm of tending hands. (124)

Lessing introduces a place in the open air, albeit "fenced off from the Big Field" (124), where self-produced goods are grown and sometimes shared with other members of the community (124). With its "fabulous soil" (124) and its watering well, the orchard produces "carrots, lettuces, beets" (124). Striking plant colours and fragrances are described, such as "purple globes of eggplant and the scarlet wealth of tomatoes" (124). Botanical species coexist in a splurge of golden and green colours that enhance the characteristic hues of lemon, banana and pawpaw trees (124). There is also a perception of "sun on foliage, of evaporating water" (124). The abundance of sensorial elements provides the narrative with a sensual quality. At first the idea of space has been introduced, the story is immersed on the passing of time, specifically a few days when the young protagonist decides to observe the sprouting process of a pomegranate tree isolated in a corner of the orchard. The story describes the protagonist's inner world as she observes this process. Her thoughts are centred on the sprout that slowly wends its way towards becoming a pomegranate fruit, as an avenue for exploring connections between

herself and the outer world. Being receptive to the growing process of the pomegranate, she probes new paths for relationships with other members of the community: her family (mainly her mother) and William. By taking the opportunity to spend time on her own every day, the young girl appropriates time and space within the edible garden as an interactive place where both public and personal issues are to be negotiated from now on.

The protagonist's emotional investment in the tomatoes and her heartbreak over their destruction by William McGregor mark a moment of epistemic rupture. Her tears are not signs of weakness but of awakening- a recognition of the limits of control and the complexity of human relationships. This aligns with feminist pedagogies that value affect, embodiment, and relationality as integral to learning.

Gendered Awakening and Emotional Literacy

Lessing's narrative centres on a female subject in transition, whose emotional literacy becomes a form of resistance. The protagonist's disappointment over the tomatoes and her romantic fixation on William McGregor reflect a deepening awareness of self and other. Judith Butler's theory of performativity helps illuminate how the girl's emotional expressions destabilize normative gender roles. Rather than conforming to stoic colonial femininity, she embraces vulnerability as a mode of agency.

The story also engages with Simone de Beauvoir's notion of the "second sex," portraying the protagonist's struggle to assert her subjectivity in a world that seeks to define her through patriarchal and colonial lenses. Her silent resistance, her emotional depth, and her embodied learning all contribute to a vision of gendered autonomy that is both personal and political.

Learning as Liberation: A Feminist Postcolonial Synthesis

By situating learning in the garden rather than the classroom, Lessing reclaims education as a liberatory process. The protagonist's journey reflects a feminist postcolonial synthesis, where autonomy is not granted but cultivated through experience, emotion, and resistance. The story challenges binaries of formal/informal, rational/emotional, and colonial/indigenous, offering a more expansive vision of what it means to learn.

Dap Louw and Anet Louw in Chapter 1 of their book *Child and Adolescent Development* says:

The development of children is one of the most fascinating wonders of life. From the moment conception takes place until the end of adolescence when the person enters the adult world, the developmental road is characterised by numerous miracles and mysteries. Learning is a relatively permanent change in behaviour or potential behaviour that results from experience or reinforced practice. It is not caused by biological maturation but by interaction with the environment. The child learns through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. These processes are shaped by the child's physical, emotional, and social development. Education is not merely the transmission of knowledge, but the cultivation of understanding, values, and the ability to think critically. (6-7)

This synthesis is echoed in Lessing's broader pedagogical project, as seen in *The Children of Violence series, The Fifth Child, and Mara and Dann*. In each, children navigate oppressive structures through alternative modes of learning, often rooted in nature, emotion, and introspection. Lessing's fiction thus models a pedagogy of liberation- one that values complexity, contradiction, and transformation.

Centenary Reflections and Archival Resonance

The centenary celebrations of Lessing's birth have prompted renewed interest in her educational philosophy. Scholars such as Lara Feigel have explored Lessing's vision of freedom and learning in works like *Free Woman: Life, Liberation and Doris Lessing*, highlighting the autobiographical and philosophical dimensions of her

fiction. Lessing's own life- marked by early departure from formal schooling and self-education through reading- mirrors the autodidactic journeys of her protagonists.

Her critique of education as indoctrination, as expressed in The Golden Notebook, underscores her belief in learning as a lifelong, liberatory process. Lessing's fiction invites readers to embrace complexity, question authority, and seek knowledge through lived experience.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Pedagogy of Experience

"Flavours of Exile" exemplifies Lessing's commitment to portraying learning as a deeply personal and political act. Through the lens of a young girl's emotional journey, the story critiques colonial education and affirms the value of experiential, affective, and embodied knowledge. This paper has argued that Lessing's narrative, offers a compelling model of gendered autonomy, where liberation is achieved not through institutional validation but through the reclamation of lived experience. In doing so, Lessing invites readers to reconsider the spaces and modes through which true learning and true freedom can occur.

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