

## **Cathartic Womanhood: Imperialism and Femininity in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm***

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### **Abstract**

Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) can be read as an anti-colonial novel, with colonialism equating patriarchy. This postcolonial reading is permitted through the characters' rebellion against what seem to be prevalent rules of the society regarding race, gender, culture, and religion. By virtue of being a woman, one is made to refuse the patriarchal/imperial society. Through being a woman, or through womanhood in general (a status assumed even by some male characters) we are able to arrive at a symbiosis between the characters and their consciences. This reading provides the reader with the tools to understand the changes that occur in the characters as well as the interaction between them and the novel's landscape, which seems to represent the natural aversion to the imposed, "unnatural" colonial rule.

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Instead of studying the colonial experience as an encounter between the European forces and the colonized peoples, recent studies in postcolonial studies seek to problematize this seemingly homogeneous body of colonizers. The breaking of the colonizer into different, conflicting forces results in the deconstruction of the monotonous, now-held-in-suspect East/ West, or colonizer/colonized binary oppositions. The white colonizers in South Africa, for example, are seen as heterogeneous groups with different social, political, and economic interests. The political manifestation of this heterogeneity is apparent in the Boer War (1899-1902) between the Afrikaners (European settlers in South Africa who established their independent republics) and the British (who control many parts of South Africa, but want to annex the Afrikaner republics). This political/economic confrontation among the colonizers questions any attempt to bring them under one theoretical umbrella. Moreover, the body of the colonizers can also be broken into conflicting forces based on gender lines. Here we can read the female to be socially colonized by the dominant imperial patriarchy.

Olive Schreiner's (1855-1920) *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), in this sense, can be read as a blow against the imperial male-made society. The characters in the novel struggle with what seem to be prevalent rules of the society regarding race, gender, culture, and religion. The only way to withdraw from this patriarchy is by refusing it. In this novel, Schreiner suggests that *being* a woman is in itself fighting back. Therefore, it is only through womanhood that characters are able to arrive at a reconciliation with themselves and with their consciences. Lyndall for this purpose works as the author's mouthpiece when she helps in bringing about the "transformation" of two characters from manhood to womanhood as their way of salvation. This "salvation" is presented both physically and spiritually through Gregory and Waldo, who both travel from ambiguity to certainty. In my treatment of the subject, I will use the terms imperialism and patriarchy interchangeably because my reading of Schreiner's novel relies on her connecting the two terms together due to their similar ideologies in the oppression and exploitation of their subjects. Abandoning imperialism in the novel entails a change in one's character, namely from patriarchy to womanhood, and herein lies the crises of the two characters of Gregory and Waldo.

*The Story of an African Farm* recounts the story of Lyndall, the young woman who is raised in a South African ostrich farm, and her challenge to the patriarchal/colonial oppressive conditions of the South African society. Lyndall leaves the farm for her education, but returns four years later devastated after a failed relationship. Gregory, the English tenant, recovers from an infatuation with Em, Lyndall's cousin, and then commences on a journey of self-discovery. Lyndall's childhood friend, Waldo, attempts to escape the oppressive isolated farm only to rediscover himself in the realities of the patriarchal/imperial society. Lyndall's death at the end of the novel is both a condemnation of this oppressive society as well as a rejuvenation of the martyrdom theme of the feminist heroine.

The novel has always been viewed as a feminist representation of the South African society in the 1870s and 1880s. Elaine Showalter, the leading feminist critic and theorist, describes Lyndall as the "first wholly serious feminist heroine" in the English novel (199). Schreiner was a leading South African novelist who sought to expose the conditions of the female in the midst of the political realities under the domination of the oppressive apartheid. Since the publication of *The Life of Olive Schreiner* (1924) by Schreiner's husband, Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner, critics tended to foreground Schreiner's political views concerning the status of women in the future of South Africa. For example, Amy Wellington, in *Women Have Told: Studies in the Feminist Tradition* (1930), emphasizes this aspect about Schreiner's literature. Similarly, Joyce Avrech Berkman, in *Olive Schreiner: Feminism on the Frontier* (1979) presents Schreiner mainly as a feminist pioneer in English literature. Even as recent books as Ann L. Ardis and Leslie W. Lewis's *Women's Experience of Modernity: 1875-1945* (2003) dwell on Schreiner's treatment of the female isolated from the political realities of South Africa as a colonized place. Indeed, Schreiner was a pioneer in the treatment of women in her fiction, but this fact cannot eclipse the way in which she was able to cast her acute observations of the political conditions of South Africa, primarily as a colonized country. The colonial experience, therefore, helped her focus her depiction of the mistreatment of women once she begins to view them as marginalized others. Recent theories, such as postcolonialism, elucidate this aspect of Schreiner's novels, particularly *The Story of an African Farm*. This study seeks to bridge the gap between Schreiner the feminist and Schreiner the humanist

through the illustration of her feminism as a response to the oppressive colonial conditions in South Africa.

In postcolonialism the previously marginalized voices of the non-European texts are brought to light and placed in the cultural center in order to be seen as counter responses to the dominant Eurocentric discourse. The feminist and the postcolonial attempts to study their own marginalization have traditionally been separated into what Bill Ashcroft et al call "a path of convergent evolution" where the two share many theoretical grounds (249). Likewise, Leela Gandhi, in *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, maintains that "both bodies of thought have concerned themselves with the study and defense of marginalized 'Others' within repressive structures of domination" (82-83). But recently the two theories have been closely linked in order to show the woman as victim of both "imperial ideology, and native and foreign patriarchies" (Gandhi 83). Gayatri Spivak never fails to emphasize the importance of this theoretical linkage between the two theories. Equating the subaltern (the colonized) with the female, she writes, "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (82-83). In her essay "Myths of Otherness: Feminism, Postmodernism and Postcolonialism," Gemma del Hoyo de la Mata clearly indicates the similarities between the two theories:

Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of "Other", marginalized and "colonized". Women, like post-colonial people, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available tools are those of the colonizer. Both groups are powerless, exploited and have a subordinate position in society. Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist postcolonialism sought to invert the structures of domination. (de la Mata)

Patriarchy and imperialism, therefore, are synonymous when it comes to the politics of domination, repression, and marginalization. To oppose

one the victim finds himself or herself simultaneously fighting the other. On the theoretical level this topic has been sufficiently addressed by critics such as Gayatri Spivak, Anne McClintock, Chandra Mohanty, Sara Suleri, and many others. On the practical level, however, few readings of the classical texts sought to illustrate this theoretical proximity. Spivak's "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" is certainly noteworthy here, despite its leaning towards more theoretical structuring of the relationship than of the illustration of it. This study seeks to posit these theoretical parallels between feminism and postcolonialism through the reading of the transformation of two male characters (Gregory and Waldo) into femininity, marking their abandonment of the ideology of the dominant male/imperial society.

Gregory's crisis in the novel is his struggle to achieve self-recognition. Whereas the rest of the characters try to *cope* with their existence, he endeavors to search for his own identity. Realizing that he is a man, Gregory starts to determine the source of his crisis. Both his physical and psychological dressing as a woman marks his first step towards the cure.

Lyndall seems to have recognized Gregory's crisis from the beginning and somehow has begun his treatment. On the Kopje, she assumes the male role, letting him play the role of a female. The conventional role of a woman (especially in the nineteenth century) is characterized by his words to Lyndall:

Do not be angry with me. I know you could never like me; but, if I might but always be near you to serve you, I would be utterly, utterly happy. I would ask nothing in return! If you could only take everything I have and use it; I want nothing but to be of use to you. (199)

Lyndall continues the male role by "literally" proposing to Gregory, "That is a clear proposal, is it not?" she asks Gregory (199). This reversed role-playing satisfies Gregory on the one hand and permits Lyndall to enlarge the circle of womanhood by means of including him on the other.

This oscillation is suggested by Gregory's name, Gregory Rose, a combination of masculine and feminine names. Alluding to Gregory's dual personality, Gerald Monsman, in his *Olive Schreiner's Fiction*, suggests that Gregory Nazianzen Rose is named after Saint Gregory

Nazianzen who defended Christ's combined nature, deity and human, in one person:

[T]he saint and his namesake both were victims of uncongenial rules, each forced to be what he in essence was not. Temperamentally, Saint Gregory desired a life of contemplation but was coerced into a life of activity; analogously, Gregory Rose is psychologically a woman but biologically a man, compelled socially to play the masculine role. (75)

The description of Gregory's home is reminiscent of traditional domestic female roles:

A stretcher filled one end of the hut, and a rack for a gun and a little hanging looking-glass diversified the gable opposite, while in the centre stood a chair and table. All was scrupulously neat and clean, for Gregory kept a little duster folded in the corner of his table-drawer, just as he had seen his mother do, and every morning before he went out he said his prayers, and made his bed, and dusted the table and the legs of the chairs, and even the pictures on the wall and the gun-rack. (139)

Gregory himself always wonders if his continues use of the "looking-glass" is appropriate: "Here he sat still and reflected. It sounded almost as if he might be conceited or unmanly to be looking at his own face in the glass. No, that would not do. So he looked for another pink sheet and began again." (140).

When Lyndall falls sick and delirious, she is nursed by her friend Gregory who disguises himself as a female nurse. Patricia Murphy, in her "Timely Interruptions: Unsettling Gender Through Temporality in the Story of an African Farm," writes, "Adopting the guise of the traditionally female role of nurse, Gregory establishes an oddly bisexual relationship with the failing Lyndall, whom he tends" (198). Murphy reads this transformation of Gregory as deliberate way to confuse the seemingly established colonial rule through the disturbance of the gender in the novel (199).

The traditional character of a woman-being sentimental and emotional- is played often by Gregory. His announcement to leave the farm and go to Lyndall is pregnant with meaning concerning the topic of his womanhood and sentimentality: "I can't stand it any more, I am going to her." The "her" that is emphasized here may signify his other self. He announces to Em that he will not need his "old" things back; "Do what you please with my things," he tells Em (214). His lifelong oscillation between his two identities is resolved with his decision, "I care for nothing! I cannot bear it! I will not! Forget! forget! . . . you can forget all the world, but you cannot forget yourself" (214). When Gregory is first introduced to the reader, he is found to be greatly melancholic and in distress. His letter to his sister illustrates this sentimentality that runs counter to the traditional Victorian standards of a gentleman. He writes to her, "it is a choice between death and madness. I can endure no more. If this should be the last letter you ever get from me, think of me tenderly, and forgive me" (142). He finishes the letter with "your disconsolate brother, on what is, in all probability, the last and distracted night of his life" (142). This exaggerated melancholy is due to his "assumption" that he is in love with Em, the "premature little old woman of sixteen, [who is] ridiculously fat"; a love which we later learn to be a mere "juvenile" infatuation that proves rather ironic once Gregory discovers his womanhood (119).

By associating himself with the oppressed female, Gregory begins his self-healing process. The scene of his trying on a female's dress for the first time marks the beginning of this process (213). Indeed, in an attempt to acclimatize fully to his new role, he tries to hide all signs of his masculinity, His beard, for example, "looked somewhat grotesque under [the kapje]; he put up his hand to hide it—that was better" (213). The result is that he grew "mild gentleness" (213). This gentleness leads him later to sympathize in a greater way with Lyndall, and so he decides to travel to her and "serve" her.

One of Lyndall's functions in the novel seems to bring out the other sides in both the main male characters, Waldo and Gregory, causing them to look for redemption through femininity. Gregory's search for redemption leads him to physical womanhood, whereas Waldo's leads him to spiritual womanhood. While Gregory literally puts on a woman's

clothes and starts acting like one, Waldo experiences both spiritually and psychologically what the life of a woman is like in a patriarchal society.

Like Lyndall, Waldo travels to seek knowledge but he eventually finds his own self. It is not till they leave home that they understand how home is crushing them. Lyndall anticipates the change that is about to overtake Waldo when she tells him: "I wonder when we shall meet again, Waldo? What you will be, and what I?" (191). Like Gregory, Waldo searches for salvation from the oppressive social/political system of patriarchy/imperialism. Realizing this, Lyndall offers him the way out of his predicament. Echoing the words of a prophet calling for salvation she asks Waldo: "Don't you wish you were a woman, Waldo?" (153). Then she repeats the question with less extremity: "Do you take an interest in the position of women, Waldo?" (153). To both questions Waldo's answer is "No" (153). Indeed, Lyndall understands Waldo's unwillingness to play the role of the victim because "No one does" (153). She then tried to explain to Waldo what the position of a victim is:

But we are cursed, Waldo, born cursed from the time our mothers bring us into the world till the shrouds are put on us. Do not look at me as though I were talking nonsense. Everything has two sides—the outside that is ridiculous, and the inside that is solemn. (154)

When Waldo is gone Lyndall affirms her belief in his salvation when she says to Gregory:

I think I should be rather astonished if he ever became a respectable member of society. . . . I don't expect to see him the possessor of bank-shares, the chairman of a divisional council, and the father of a large family; wearing a black hat, and going to church twice on Sunday. He would rather astonish me if he came to such an end. (197)

In short, Lyndall does not expect Waldo, who has started his self-healing process, to be a fully functional male member in the society. He will neither have any imperial work nor encourage such a thing by attending the religious institutions that perpetuate it. He will not even help in adding to the imperial population by begetting children.

Waldo's spiritual salvation or rebirth occurs in his journey. In the letter which he writes to Lyndall, who ironically has been dead for a while, Waldo describes the phases of this rebirth. His work for the shopkeeper underscores his first female role when he "found out afterwards [the shopkeeper] was only giving [him] half as much as he gave to the others" (219). This experience of receiving half what men receive is an explicit exemplification of the female Victorian economy. The "imperial" men in the store care for nothing but to get the women's money. To Waldo they seem like "worms with oil on" (220). Waldo himself is "cozened," like these women, and financially beguiled out of his earning. He certainly does not belong to this imperial male-made financial world.

In his house, Waldo keeps two books: "Elementary Physiology" and "First Principles" (220); both discuss human physiology in light of Darwin's theory of evolution. The full title of the first book is: *Lessons in Elementary Physiology* by T. H. Huxley (1824-1895), the famous English evolutionist; the second is by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), a social evolutionist. Waldo's state of mind represents a smaller type of evolution. From the bottom of humanity representing the beastly man into the pinnacle of benevolence of womanhood, Waldo is experiencing a short form of life itself. Indeed, he makes a distinction between his present state and his previous "European" one when he says:

Now, when I see one of those evil-looking men that come from Europe—natives, with the beast-like, sunken face, different from any Kaffir's—I know what brought that look into their eyes. . . . It is work; grinding, mechanical work, that they for their ancestors have done, that has made them into beast. (223)

Waldo now is closer to the Kaffirs with whom he has learned to sympathize than he is to the Europeans whom he has learned to abhor. Like natives he suffers the sub-human working conditions:

You may work a man till he is a devil. I know it, because I have felt it. . . . For eighteen hours of the twenty-four we worked in the wet. The mud went up to the axles sometimes, and we had to dig the wheels out. . . . My master swore at me more than ever. (223-24)

The Kaffirs, too, relate to him. The Bushman boy smiles at him and says, "You and I are comrades. I have lain in a read too. I know all about it" (224). Like all who are oppressed, Waldo has no choice but to work for that master: "I do not know why I kept on working so hard for that master," he writes to Lyndall (225). He has learned to sympathize with the oppressed because he has been one himself. Not only does he relate to women and Kaffirs but also to animals as well. He fights the abuser of the oxen just as he would the abuser of any other living thing.

Like women, Waldo becomes important to his community as long as he is profitable. Not only is he "tricked" financially but spiritually and emotionally as well. He is beguiled out of his horse by emotional appeal (220-21) and out of his "half-a-crown" by spiritual appeal (222). The exploitation of Waldo adjoins him with those who usually fall subjects of abuse in Victorian England, women and natives.

The refusal to *own* is an important issue in *The Story of an African Farm* because in it lies the distinction between the oppressed and the oppressors. Till the end Waldo refuses to own anything. To Lyndall he writes, "You are my very own; nothing else is my own so" (230). He refuses the money which Em gives him saying:

No, little one, I will not take it. . . . [T]he time was when I would have been very grateful to any one who would have given me a little money, a little help, a little power of gaining knowledge. But now, I have gone so far alone I may go on to the end. I don't want it, little one. (265)

This astonishing change in the character of Waldo—which is a result of his journey—is represented in his dream in chapter 13 of the novel. Waldo's dream is a microcosm to his healing journey. In his dream he looks for Lyndall the child but finds only her footmarks. He follows these footmarks

in and out, in and out, and among the bushes where the honey-creeper hung, he went looking for her. At last, far off, in the sunshine, he saw her gathering shells upon the sand. She was not a child now but a woman. (255)

In his journey, Waldo has been following the steps of Lyndall. The difficult encounters which he has faced to reach the truth as he sees it

(and as he thinks it is ultimately held by Lyndall) resemble the dark bushes he passes through when looking for Lyndall in his dream. The dark bushes in Waldo's dream prove to be an effeminizing force because when Lyndall passes through them she is no longer a child but a woman. Waldo, too, becomes a woman by the very same experience. When he wakes up, "the strong man drew his breath like a frightened woman" (255). In the dream, Waldo finds Lyndall by the sea, the symbol of truth in the novel, to which all wish to withdraw echoing the words of Em:

And take me away,  
And take me away,  
And take me away,  
To the Blue Water. (211)

The perfect change for Waldo is death: "Change is death, change is death" (258). His death at the end of the novel is the last step in his metamorphosis. Through this last step, he will be able to meet Lyndall after being worthy of her, having changed and become like her: free. "Let us die, beloved, you and I," he addresses Lyndall, "that we may pass on for ever through the Universal Life" (260).

Landscape and nature in *The Story of an African Farm* present a driving force behind some of the characters' decisions. Like a separate character, Nature warns, suggests, and sometimes even intimidates. Cherry Clayton, in her *Olive Schreiner*, sees this force as working against the colonial power that is trying to subjugate the land as it did its people. Waldo's reconnection with nature in his journey, in which he attains self-recognition and harmony, suggests, Clayton writes, "that for the disinherited colonial the imaginative response to indigenous nature replaces any actual control over the land" (56). The end of the novel (when Waldo is reconnected with nature eternally) suggests a similar understanding. It is through this unity that he and Lyndall meet. Only after experiencing oppression and living his life like a native of the land or a woman, does Waldo have the opportunity to oppose colonialism and so win Lyndall forever. This opposition takes the form of relating to and identifying with nature as a rival force to colonialism. The "evil world, a deceitful, treacherous, mirage-like world" is overcome by simply sitting in the sunshine, for "to sit there gloating in the sunlight was perfect"

(267). Waldo shares life and spirit “sisterhood” with all elements of nature simply by viewing himself as part of the same system as these natural elements. His death announces this oneness with nature when he becomes, like a tree, a playground for the chickens.

This femininity in viewing nature is essential in postcolonial treatment of landscape and space. The effeminacy of landscape has been used by feminists and postcolonialists as a tool to indicate the wish to subjugate and/or penetrate it. The sexualization of landscape or other identity markers (such as mother-country, mother-land, mother-earth, and mother-tongue) illustrates their fertility as well as vulnerability. In *The Story of an African Farm*, however, this female landscape is able to encompass and prevail over these discordant elements.

The depiction of Gregory and Waldo in this novel means to foreground their sexuality as a postcolonial response to imperialism and its oppression. The equation between these two tyrannical ideologies is the pretext that Schreiner wants to underscore in her novel. Ode Ogede, in his essay “An Early Image of Apartheid and Postapartheid Society: Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*,” affirms that in her depiction of Lyndall, Gregory, and Waldo “as individuals who act out the roles their environment assigns them during the first phase of colonialist settlement in Africa, Schreiner exposes oppression’s nastiness in all its raw form” (255).

Reading *The Story of an African Farm* as an anti-colonial text provides the reader with the benefit of understanding the changes that occur in the characters and the role of landscape in the novel. The triumph of nature at the end underscores the failure of the colonial power to conquer the land. The struggle of colonialism versus nature is symbolized in the struggle of Womanhood versus Manhood in the lives of two characters. Their striving for self-recognition presents in itself (as it manifests a transformation from masculinity to femininity) their fight against the imperial powers from which they finally break free.

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Dive deep into Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* with extended analysis, commentary, and discussion. Arid, dusty plateau of the southwestern part of what is now the Republic of South Africa and the interior of what was the British Cape Colony during the period in which the novel is set. Most of the action takes place on the plains of the Karroo, a region at once beautiful and oppressive. The blazing summer sun, which makes the earth itself cry for water, oppresses both man and beast, adding to the sense of powerlessness felt by the child characters who are the focus of the story. Log in. Create an account. *The Story of an African Farm*. 2005. METASCORE. Generally favorable reviews based on 4 Critic Reviews. See All. 65. USER SCORE. This adaptation of South African writer Olive Schreiner's cult novel is too cute by far, sapping emotional resonance from a story that was in its original incarnation apparently far darker. Read full review. See all 4 reviews. User Score. Write a Review. tbd. Positive But Olive Schreiner has woven a story out of spiritual questioning, and discovered some singular connections and exceptional insights along the way. There i œœWas it only John, think you, who saw the heavens open? The dreamers see it every day.œœ There is good material to excerpt as food for "The Story of an African Farm" is a novel narrating episodes from the lives of three children as they grow up on a farm in South Africa: through dreamy yet visceral prose, the reader learns of Waldo's spiritual unrest, Lyndall's fierce and far-reaching ambitions, and of the stolid Em, who is. sweet but no fool. The narrative is evocative in its description of a different time and place and a unique culture. But "The Story of an African Farm" is a mess.