

# EDUCATION AND FEMALE AGENCY IN THE GARDEN: DORIS LESSING'S "FLAVOURS OF EXILE"

## EDUCACIÓN Y AGENCIA FEMENINAS EN EL JARDÍN: "FLAVOURS OF EXILE" DE DORIS LESSING

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### **Abstract**

Doris Lessing's recent centenary brought opportunities to look at her works with fresh eyes. This is also the case with Lessing's interest in education (Cairnie 2008; Sperlinger 2017), especially that of children in their transition to youth. This paper argues that this was an interest with which Lessing consistently concerned herself in both her fiction and non-fiction writings. Using the corpus of her African short stories as a primary reference framework, this paper studies "Flavours of Exile" (1957), a short story in which a family's vegetable garden becomes a learning space for informal experimentation. The story is used by Lessing as a platform to raise her concerns about the education of the female subject in the historical context of decolonisation.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing, African short stories, colonialism, education, garden.

### **Resumen**

La reciente celebración del centenario de Doris Lessing ha supuesto la oportunidad de dedicar nuevas miradas a su obra. Esto es así con respecto a las aportaciones críticas existentes sobre el interés de Lessing por la educación (Cairnie 2008; Sperlinger 2017), sobre todo en niños y niñas en procesos de transición hacia la

adolescencia. Este artículo muestra que, para Lessing, dicho interés es constante y se observa a lo largo de su obra, tanto de ficción como de no ficción. Tomando el corpus de los relatos africanos como marco principal de referencia, este artículo estudia “Flavours of Exile” (1957), un relato donde el huerto familiar se transforma en espacio informal de experimentación, y es para Lessing un vehículo para dar paso a sus preocupaciones por la educación del sujeto femenino en un contexto histórico de descolonización.

**Palabras clave:** Doris Lessing, relatos africanos, colonialismo, educación, jardín.

*An orchard of pomegranates/ With all choicest fruits.*

*The Song of Solomon.*

*My vegetable love should grow/ vaster than empires, and more slow.*

Andrew Marvell, “To His Coy Mistress”.

## 1. Introduction

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The short story “Flavours of Exile” (1957),<sup>1</sup> included in Doris Lessing’s African Stories, 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 (Achilles and Bergmann 2015) which are entangled both physically and metaphorically (Louw 2010a). In an anecdote in her autobiography (Lessing 1995; Louw 2010a), 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 (Louw 2010a: 167). When preparing this article, I had the opportunity to see Leonora Carrington’s “The Poms of the Subsoil”,<sup>2</sup> a pictorial depiction of a similar phenomenon as that described by Lessing. Here the sapling grows out from a white piece of cloth on the ground in the centre of the painting. Surrounding the force of soil and moisture, three female figures (the Poms) gather around the solitary sapling in a ceremony of contemplation, as if in ecstasy. 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.<sup>3</sup>

This paper explores the importance of place in the formation of learning experiences (Klein 2018) and takes the study by Tom Sperlinger (2017) on Lessing's pedagogical intention (reflected in *Mara and Dann*) as the basis for an analysis of the story "Flavours of Exile". The analysis also relies, among others, on the contributions by Victoria Rosner (1999), Pat Louw (2010a), and Dennis Walder (2008) on the representation of tensions in power relations in the inner and outer spaces in Lessing's fiction. I explore the pedagogical turn in Lessing's narrative fiction, bearing in mind that "Flavours of Exile" and other works feature children who witness tensions between the coloniser and the colonised, and who constantly face challenges within their sometimes oppressive family environment, as well as other challenges from their external settings (either from the natural space or the surroundings of the family home, including the orchard and garden). Particularly in "Flavours of Exile", Lessing focuses on the educational aspects of the transition from childhood to adulthood, where the environment is of crucial importance.

## 2. Children and the Pedagogical Intention in Lessing's Works

Children are a pervasive presence in Lessing's work. I refer not only to *African Stories*, but also to the *Children of Violence* series; *The Fifth Child*; *Ben, in the World*; *Love, Again*; and *The Sweetest Dream*, where Lessing evokes the signs and traces left by traumatic episodes in the lives of children and adolescents (Arias 2012; Watkins 2015). Rosario Arias (2012) stated that the marks of both the violence of war and the failure of the communist dream to radically transform social structures are 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 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. Her fiction thus develops in how it 'teaches' as well" (2017: 309). In my view, this inclination shows Lessing's interest in dealing with education in childhood and adolescence from the early days of her literary production.<sup>4</sup> Childhood and adolescence are treated as life cycles when vulnerability is expressed, and where the strength is found to act on the basis of reflection and discernment, identifying the points that need to be reinforced to overcome the difficulties that arise. In fact, Lessing often dealt with issues related to pedagogy in one form or another as part of her personal motivation and of her identity as a writer.<sup>5</sup> Lessing linked "the function of storytelling" (1999:

5) to education (6), storytelling being “a repository of information, used to instruct the young: along with entertainment comes the message” (7). In her “Introduction” to the collection *Kalila and Dimna: Bidpai Fables Told by Ramsay Wood* (1998b), Lessing highlighted the need to encourage people to read, particularly the young. She expressed a similar concern in her article “An Evening with Doris Lessing” (1998a), where she showed her concern for the current educational and cultural “lower standards” (1998a) as regards reading and teaching about reading. In *Problems, Myths and Stories* (1999), as well as in her speech when she received the *Prince of Asturias Award for Literature* in 2001 (now called *Princess of Asturias*), Lessing expressed her amazement at the lack of knowledge of fundamental texts, such as the Bible, on the part of the new generations. Similarly, an article entitled “The Tragedy of Zimbabwe” (2004) is one example of the texts that show Lessing’s interest in activities related to the promotion of reading and education. In the article, she condemned Zimbabwe’s government for having “denied [people] proper education” (Lessing 2004: 235), and added that to provide reading materials for students and teachers was a necessity for people who “hungered for books” (Lessing 2004: 235). Furthermore, this interest runs parallel to her awareness of the ways in which people connect and identify with other beings in nature (García Navarro 2003: 121; Gruia 2016: 211-212). I intend to show the construction of various forms of learning, aimed at encouraging personal agency, which is presented in the family garden and orchard in “Flavours of Exile”. This should be taken as a cross-border, interactive cultural space, where the young protagonist experiences transformation processes and life transitions. It is worth enquiring here about how learning experiences are treated in Lessing’s texts; and also about the pedagogical intention of a text where one’s young educational experience is reframed based on a personal negotiation of the ways of looking at, engaging in, and transforming that experience (Dewey 2008). My interest lies in exploring the value of the orchard as a space that informs Lessing’s assessment of the transition from childhood to the subsequent life periods, given the “phenomenological quality of places as central to meaning making” (Klein 2018: 5). This should take into account the physical and emotional implications of the aforementioned transition, and the forms in which learning is constructed, transmitted, rejected and re-signified in one of Lessing’s African Stories.

In “Flavours of Exile”, the experience of an anonymous protagonist aged 13 unfolds half-way between the inner and outer spaces of the family home (the house and the vegetable garden). It is in these spaces that tensions, challenges and new perspectives on the perceptions of herself and of those around her arise. The family vegetable garden is an important place for acquiring new knowledge, removed from traditional formal education. It appears as a potential space both for education and resistance (Li 2009), where power relations operate and reorganise the

individual's gaze and attention towards the world around the protagonist. According to Cajetan Iheka, post-colonial narratives share a common feature, namely being "histories of dispossession into the otherwise tranquil space of order, leisure, and green aesthetics" (2018: 665). For Iheka, this anti-pastoral feature can be applied to some of Lessing's works, including *The Grass Is Singing* (665). Louw, for her part, argued that Lessing's African short stories contain both pastoral and anti-pastoral elements (2010b). In the case of "Flavours of Exile", in addition to the anti-pastoral element, there is a critical intention (2010b) which, in my view, involves the protagonist's resistance and determination. This critical intention can be seen in the representation of the transition from childhood to adolescence in informal spaces, relying on an autodidact's contextual, constructivist, and pedagogical perspective (Vigotsky 2014). This is done via an introspective, intimate process that has consequences for the family and for the public environment in which the young girl is immersed. In this process, things gradually gain a representative capacity that makes it possible to evaluate and re-signify the experience (Dewey 2008). No reference is made in this story to formal education; instead, education occurs in a family setting, the initial socialising space *par excellence*, an informal context of which the garden is a part. This space is adjacent to the house and is a fragment of fenced-in nature; it is also connected to the vast wild, black space colonised by the white man. The outer world disclosed in the story includes the neighbours: William, aged 15, and his parents, the MacGregors, who frequently visit the family and are invited to walk around the garden and the orchard cultivated by the girl's mother. The family vegetable garden is therefore a liminal, creative place of passage between the house and the rest of the world, where the girl apprehends its potentialities to construct informal forms of learning. This is also the case for Tommy and Dirk in the short story called "The Antheap" (1994d)<sup>6</sup> in which, as noted by Julie Cairnie, the two children learn lessons in a different way to those structured traditionally in formal education (2008).

### 3. Decolonising the Garden

After the notion of space has been introduced, the story is concentrated 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 (primarily 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. At first sight, the story presents a set of organic material (Hunt 2000) grown in a family-owned piece of land. Lessing introduces a place in the open air, albeit “fenced off from the Big Field” (1994a: 124),<sup>7</sup> 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. As noted by Terry Eagleton (1990: 13), the mixture of smells, textures and sounds resonates on the body and the mind, leading to a (conscious or unconscious) encounter with the aesthetic experience, which involves passions, emotions and affects (Highmore 2010: 121). As well as providing an image of wealth and vigour, the value of the orchard lies in its utility, another reason why it can be admired both privately and publicly. It is also presented as a place for entertainment, and as a shelter in the face of possible external adversities (Vande Keere and Plevoets 2018: 24). This is evoked in the lyrical notes interspersed in the narrative (“sun on foliage, [...] the wealth of tomatoes”). But the initial near-elegiac tone is blurred as the daughter reveals there is an immense (not spatial, but affective and emotional) distance between her and the other protagonist, her mother. The initial descriptive splurge awakens and stirs the senses, which is in stark contrast with the first reference to the mother: “For her, that garden represented a defeat” (Lessing 1994a: 124). At that point, the narrative’s temporal trajectory moves back; historical time and the story’s time become separated. The allusion to the mother figure immediately introduces a narrative thread about the sense of belonging and the value of memory, of loss, of the possibilities that enhance people’s lives and of how they experience and modulate those possibilities. As noted by Michele Slung, “the very first story was about a garden” (2012: 9). For Gilles Clément the garden denotes the principles of human settlements and sedentarisation (2019). This long-term fondness developed between humanity and plants is presented in “Flavours of Exile” through a nameless adolescent girl who not only recounts her present experience but also a part of her mother’s story. Her account evokes her mother’s past life in Persia (now Iran), where she had kept her own house and garden. The garden was watered by small canals that also helped keep the house cool. It also had an orchard with “roses and jasmine, walnut

trees and pomegranates” (1994a: 127), a private paradise on a farm owned by her mother’s English family in the Middle East. Like the original garden mentioned in Genesis (Marco Mallent 2010: 252; Alexander 2012: 116; McGregor 2015), reminiscent of mythical arcadian harmony, the garden of these colonists encompassed elements that evoked beauty and well-being. The garden is also suggestive of Virgil’s and Homer’s gardens, and of gardens depicted in paintings from different periods and cultural traditions, including *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch, the vegetable and fruit gardens by Brueghel, as well as the gardens depicted in the Safavid and Qajar traditions (Caygill 2006). The creative potential of the orchard and the garden takes on an additional dimension when these spaces are conceived of as being of the soul, as Saint Teresa of Ávila did, “as a celebration of its intelligence and of its full being” (Lottman 2015: 238). These environments have also been presented as places for finding oneself, such as the *hortus deliciarum* of Herrad of Landsberg and Christine de Pizan. Indeed, in *The City of Ladies*, De Pizan reflected on the construction potential of gardens as “fertile ground, where fruits of all kinds flourish and fresh streams flow, a[s] place[s] where every good thing grows in abundance” (1999: 7). Taken as a symbolic representation of paradise on Earth (Farahani et al. 2016: 5), Lessing’s mother’s Persian orchard evidenced her desire to have her dreams fulfilled, which her later life in Africa would fail to do.

The Oriental experience of the protagonist’s mother, rooted in the Persian garden that had provided the family with a variety of fruit and vegetables, was emulated by the four pomegranate trees she planted in the African orchard. To this immigrant woman in her struggle to live in her new homeland, the African soil became the depository of a personal dream, the opportunity for an exotic dream to come true: “Why not pomegranates here, in Africa? Why not?” (Lessing 1994a: 127). However, not only was African soil inadequate for fruit and vegetables to successfully grow and develop their full flavour, but it caused pomegranate trees to dry out or be devoured by ants, except for one forgotten pomegranate tree, standing solitary by the wild gooseberry plants (127). Although the protagonist’s mother felt “defeated” by the orchard, her desire to find the exact flavour and fragrance of the fruit and vegetables enjoyed in Persia and in the metropolis grew stronger. This may be indicative of both her difficulty in detaching herself from the past and her zeal for achieving the perfect hues (Giesecke and Jacobs 2012: 8) expected in the orchard edibles. The African soil shared with the Oriental soil the strong, hot climate and the nutrient-rich irrigation water. Nevertheless, for this white, middle-class mother from the colony who had settled in Africa, the soil seemed inadequate and could not provide the nuances of flavour of the fruit and vegetables produced in England. The Oriental soil for the protagonist’s mother was perhaps an idealised forever-lost paradise, which she had abandoned for a way

of life away from everything she had ever known. Persia had been the place with which she identified and where she had developed her sense of belonging to the group and to the nation. In this way, the political significance of Lessing's story is twofold: it provides the perspective of the colonising subject, represented by the mother, who cannot find her place outside the metropolis; and the perspective of the subordinate, represented by the protagonist girl in her transition to adolescence, segregated from the community cohort (Worth and Hardill 2015) until she reaches adulthood (Gaitán in Voltarelli 2017: 278). While the mother's nostalgia about her place of origin is linked to her recognition that she belongs to a privileged group, she is unable to identify with the space (interior/the house/ exterior), the culture and the way of life of the original African community. For example, her exclamations that the gooseberries in her orchard "are not gooseberries at all" because they are not "real English gooseberries" (Lessing 1994a: 125) are symptomatic of the fact that she has become uprooted in the process of voluntary displacement; it is a coloniser's dream, bringing with her those eminently true and pure values and customs regarded as her own, including the flavour of food. This can be seen in the mother's interest in availing herself of fruit cans from England,<sup>8</sup> which had been made possible by the advances in means of transport and communication, "the marvels of civilization" (125) typical of a modern household (Pérez 2012); and in her attachment to exoticism, derived from her status as a colonising subject, as shown in her attempt to plant species from other latitudes (such as pomegranate trees, which she had grown during her stay in Persia).

It is worth highlighting that nostalgia goes hand-in-hand with progress in the story. Indeed, nostalgia can be seen in the mother's yearning for Home and a way of life she believes to have been lost forever, in the same way as she lost her Persian house and garden when her family decided to move to Africa (Lessing 1994a: 126). The garden, as a representation of the world (Cooper 2017: 3), is a defeat, as we now know. Nostalgia (Walder 2008; Watkins 2015: 32) is the result of the metaphysical desolation felt by the mother, and is also linked to the survival conditions faced by the family in a territory perceived as being hostile, a place where the mother's ideals and aspirations are thwarted. Within this arduous processing of nostalgia, the daughter starts to recognise her mother's hard work, as she "toiled and bent over [...] the exhaustless plenty of the garden" (Lessing 1994a: 125), thanks to which the family are able to enjoy various kinds of food. The young protagonist displays no guilt, unlike other female characters created by Lessing, such as Martha Quest, Janna Somers, Sarah Durham, Julia Lennox and Lessing herself, who referred to guilt as a constant presence in her relationship with her mother from an early age. Interestingly, the publication of "Flavours of Exile" in 1957 coincided with the death of Lessing's mother. In the same year Lessing returned to Southern Rhodesia for the first time since she had left for

London in 1949 (Arias 2012). In “Flavours of Exile”, the young protagonist’s express recognition of her mother’s effort in looking after the orchard may be interpreted as reflecting Lessing’s recognition of her own mother. The observation made by the young girl in the story goes beyond the revelation provided in Lessing’s autobiography: “As usual I pitied her for her dreadful life [...] returned to my very earliest self, the small girl who could see how she suffered” (1995: 203). In “Flavours of Exile”, the mother’s effort, and perhaps also her sadness after having previously pictured herself enjoying a vast property in Africa with garden spaces, led her to regard her colonial experience as a failure. This experiencing of their lifepath as a failure is shared by Lessing’s other female protagonists (Markow 2013). One of the consequences was that the protagonist’s mother stopped trying to keep the orchard in optimal condition. For example, she decided not to grow certain species, such as peas, as meticulous attention was needed to grow them successfully (Lessing 1994a: 125). Having given up trying to look after them, wild gooseberry bushes grew in their place, under which the girl and William MacGregor laughed, quarrelled and “ate (gooseberries) together” (125). Furthermore, the protagonist’s father commented on the great effort required to cultivate certain crops, which did not go unnoticed by the girl. While he chewed some peas when the family were sitting at the table, he “grumbled” (125) and said that the wealth of their family was water, as it was the true gold that made it possible to have the abundance they enjoyed (125). The father eats and grumbles that water is gold, the element that makes the peas grow. He does not say a word about the peas’ flavour. But the girl appreciates that the peas are grown not only because of water, but because her “mother toiled and bent over those” beds of peas (125). In my view, it is, again, a hint of the homage Lessing is paying her mother through this young protagonist. These references are a reminder that Lessing often mentioned her parents in her writings. As Lessing related in her autobiography, her parents became engaged while her father was convalescing at the hospital where her mother was working as a nurse (1995), her father being “a minor official” (1994a: 127), a former combatant who was mutilated in World War I. The couple’s life, which was marked by traumatic war experiences and their survival away from England, was vibrantly depicted in *Alfred and Emily* (2008), even though at the end of the novel Lessing reinvented the events related to her parents’ lives. The text presents an “Emily” for whom moving to her African house involved facing her worst fears as an immigrant after her life in Persia where, in her daughter’s words, her parents had lived “unfortunately, for too short a time” (1994a: 127). To my mind, the words of the young protagonist of “Flavours of Exile” constitute a statement of filial recognition (of the mother figure) within Lessing’s search for the “good-will” love discussed by Freire (in Romão 2019).

The family orchard as a fragrant, colourful whole plays a significant role in terms of how children are educated and self-educated in informal spaces. It is interesting to note that food and the mother are inseparable in the story; the mother connects with her origins and her past through this edible life that she grows in a small plot of land with the purpose of feeding her family. However, the daughter is clearly aware (as Lessing herself was) that she has a different origin to her mother's and father's. To acknowledge this, the narrative voice chooses a meaningful connection between the young protagonist and her environment: hers is an "inheritance of veld and sun" (Lessing 1994a: 126). Thus she feels that she is the beneficiary of an inheritance that distinguishes her from her parents from the outset. Her self-recognition makes her the true protagonist in her search for agency while, at the same time, it differentiates her from her mother who is incapable of accepting her status of self-exile, separated from her place of origin, repeatedly looking "backwards" (Bazin 2008: 117). This creates a vast distance between her and her daughter. Even though the daughter lacks recognised status within the social structure networks (Gaitán 2014; Romão 2019), she does not wish to have a role that relegates her to the domestic sphere. Nor does she want to be the product of oppressive forms of family-based and informal education, as is the case for girls in other stories by Lessing such as "Old John's Place" (1994c) or "Plants and Girls" (1994b). Her decision to travel the road to emancipation drives her to symbolically leave by moving away from the core of her home, from the laws, contradictions and the burden of the unsatisfied desires of her parents. Her journey takes her to a corner of the orchard where she will spend days by the pomegranate tree, under a beating sun (1994a: 129), practising a form of observation that will lead her to the centre of herself.

At this point it is worth recalling the third event that marked Lessing's personal and literary life in 1957. *Going Home* was published that year, after the aforementioned journey. Nostalgia pervades this autobiographical book that narrates the author's first visit to Southern Rhodesia eight years after she had left for Europe. Roberta Rubenstein argues that nostalgia entails an experience of temporal separation with the object of longing, particularly when referred to an existential state characteristic of adulthood (2001: 4-16). As claimed by Jenny Diski, even though Lessing had left Africa years before, she "was a farm girl, [missing] the landscape, the skies, the veldt, the sunrise, the animals, the smell after rain" (2015: 13-16). In terms of remembrance of, and longing for, that lost place, Walder points out that, for Lessing, Africa was a place of suffering where she learnt different lessons, and was also a place "[that] transcend[ed], as it put [...] into perspective, the human condition" (2008). The return home became a constant exercise in negotiation between the love for the place where she belonged, nostalgia, and the recognition that she would not be able to re-live what she had

already experienced, even if she could return. As noted by Susan Watkins, in *Going Home* Lessing “conceives ‘home’ as a wandering site of nostalgia, exile and alienation” (2015: 33). Here the space and the landscape are the fabric where human and non-human life become entangled; where the tensions between the colonising and the colonised societies and the ensuing challenges are managed (in the midst of the political independence of the colony, within the then newly created Central African Federation). Lessing, a witness of the upsurge of decolonisation and of the appearance of new nation-states, endowed the young protagonist of “Flavours of Exile” with converging features resulting from her hybrid cultural origin, a sign and “irretrievable condition of a post-colonial modernity” (Chennells in Watkins and Chambers 2008: 4). Showcasing the wealth of this cultural and ethnographic heritage is in stark contrast with the grieving process experienced by the mother in “Flavours of Exile”. This grief is inseparable from the physical materiality (Moss 2009: 9) embodied by the orchard and her daughter, who approaches the pomegranate tree full of curiosity and desire, but is also exiled, at least temporarily, in this liminal space removed from traditional education frameworks that she has made her own. This is where the unequal relationship between the girl and her mother—the latter caught up in a nostalgic and authoritarian discourse—is brought into question. The protagonist focuses on an experience that becomes geographically located in the space which she gradually appropriates for herself throughout the story (Moraru 2018). At this point she has to learn how to handle the relationship with her mother and, beyond that, how to approach her own sensuality.

#### 4. An *Exploratorium* for Female Agency

The analysis so far reflects a story with links to coming-of-age narratives. The period evoked in “Flavours of Exile” spent by the family in former Persia and the narrative time of the story connect the transition space between childhood and other developmental stages. I refer to the girl’s passage into menarche, which occurs in parallel with the events in the vegetable garden. In the absence of a formal educational environment, this space is a centre of discoveries or *exploratorium* (Gardner 2013: 201) where the protagonist undergoes various experiences and gradually makes decisions as she finds herself and others. In this way, the natural and the social converge in the orchard, a domesticated natural space, and the perspective in Lessing’s pictorial narrative turns to the pedagogical value of the vegetable garden as an educational space where the adolescent engages in a cultural and learning activity, both as an observer of and a participant in a living, ever-changing environment. Here, a bush or a tree becomes “sanctuary,

safety, a place to hide”, as in Haggith and Ritchie’s words, since they allow children to rely on “a primitive instinct to take shelter in [...], to den up under them” (1998).<sup>9</sup> The orchard is, therefore, a site rich in educational potential, a *Thinker Tool* (Gardner 2013: 229) used to observe the functioning model of the world. It is also a hiding place in which to experience new sensations, and a watchtower where the girl can stand while the time of learning and change elapses and she enters a different developmental physiological, psychological and emotional stage (Prendergast 2000). It is through this slow but firm approach, which involves both determined observation and a time for waiting, that the experience of discovery (Eisner 2002; Bárcena Orbe 2005: 69) and self-discovery remains whole and uninterruptedly unfolds (Cassano 2014: 11). This is achieved when the girl develops her ability to be an *I*, a subject who becomes increasingly aware of how she feels and what happens to her. Furthermore, by presenting the adolescent in the external space, observing how the orchard responds to natural cycles (as reflected in the sprouting of the pomegranate, for example), Lessing allows her to decide on how she wants to behave, instead of being in an “orderly” public space” (Richardson and Rofel 2018: 534) and (only apparently) subordinated to her mother’s orders and decisions. Following the afore-mentioned scene in which the girl and William eat gooseberries while they are lying under a bush looking at the sky, the description is interrupted by some conclusive words: “It intoxicated us” (Lessing 1994a: 125). The girl is shown to be engaged in emotional development, immersed in a new current of emotions after she discovers that she has fallen in love with William. Like Lessing herself, the girl is an heiress of sun and veld, and her infatuation with William brings “a promise of warmth and understanding [she] had never known” (1994a: 127) as well as a “tightness” in her chest (127), which leads her to look for shelter by the pomegranate tree. The girl’s longing is a cry (Byatt 1998: vii) for emotional completion (“My beloved is mine and I am his”, as written in *Song of Solomon* 2:16), to be embodied in experiences of transformative learning that need to be integrated by the child. The possibilities of preserving innocence are juxtaposed with the girl’s pursuit of solitude. It is not by chance that she becomes interested in the solitary pomegranate tree, “a tough, obstinate-looking thing” (Lessing 1994a: 128). Even though this is a luxuriant vegetable garden, the protagonist is not portrayed as an ideal, endearing plant hunter (Brickell 2006: 11), nor as a seeker of solace, oblivious to everything around her, as Miranda was in Virginia Woolf’s “In the Orchard”. The girl makes her decision to remain firmly by the pomegranate tree to observe the fruiting process, learning to experience her sensuality by being on her own, feeling free under her tree and feverish as she remembers William’s blue-eyed gaze. Thus, she associates the shape of the sprouting pomegranate with women’s breasts, and the red colour of the pomegranate grains with “the red of blood” (Lessing 1994a: 128).

In an age when decorum was taken as a sign of propriety, conforming to social conventions, the young girl nevertheless acknowledges the stirring of her sensual awakening. Surrounded by images of blood and evoking William's physical beauty, she feels that the orchard is "haunted by William" (Lessing 1994a: 128).<sup>10</sup> Through rich descriptions of the edible garden, the story depicts the girl seeking new paths to give meaning to her experience, as when she tastes "the tiny crimson seeds [whose] warm, sweet juice flooded [her] tongue" (128). The narrative flow, redolent with sensuous images, portrays a girl who feels "more than a little mad" (128) in the exploratory voyage of her feelings during her coming of age for William and for a new negotiation of family relationships. The sprout, as a "tiny teacher of tenacity" (Haggith and Ritchie 1998), challenges the girl to observe these lessons (Rapp 2007: 15). She passes the days in conscious observation and, while ignoring William's response to her romantic projection (Lessing 1994a: 129), she calls herself "mad" (129) and adds that she feels "ashamed that that marvellous feverish world should depend on a half-grown boy in dusty khaki, gripping a piece of grass between his teeth as he stared ahead of him" (129). The girl senses that making the transition from child to woman comes with the loss of innocence. As she immerses herself in the changing nature of the orchard, accepting and internalising the challenges of her transition, her identity is transformed. Her agency increases while she resists the norms that derive from her protective education, and from the disparaging way in which her mother treats her. While the silence about the physiological changes undergone by the girl is clear, it is also true that she wants to grow (as does her mother). The difference between them is that the mother is trapped by an unsatisfied desire for growth, a vacuum resulting from not belonging, whereas the girl does not experience this frustration. The daughter is focused on an introspective process and delights in contemplation. She does not reject the orchard's disorder which is to be found in the physiological transition she is about to face (Lively 2017: 128). She awaits her development promising new possibilities which she hopes will be productive, as was the case with the long-awaited bud of the pomegranate.

The idea of the orchard as an experiential *hortus deliciarum*, with optimal conditions for the young protagonist's educational and spiritual growth, becomes more apparent as the story advances. Lessing gives her the opportunity to find her own tree of knowledge, this unsubmitive pomegranate tree that has resisted heat and solitude and, after being abandoned by those who planted it, has sprouted up again. This fact amazed herself, her family and her neighbours, as it was both unexpected and striking. The girl is also an unsubmitive plant<sup>11</sup> who sits in the shade of this tree in order to read both the world and herself. She seeks to find a model in a world that she considers to be an educational, socialising space, where she gradually constructs and recognises an identity that she wants to claim for

herself, unlike her mother who regards the world as an unchangeable compartmentalised place. It is worth mentioning that this family garden is not radically dismissive of its Arcadian status and, more importantly, of hope. Hope emerges as the narrative progresses, most clearly towards the end of the story, because the girl receives the joy (Scafi 2013) brought about by her decision to turn her spatial and sensuous appropriation into a strategy to claim her own territory, both in physical terms and in terms of her relationship with her mother.

## 5. Conclusion

Reading “Flavours of Exile” over half a century after its publication, and with the resonance of Doris Lessing’s recently celebrated centenary, is an experience that should be approached as one would approach the plants growing in an orchard or a garden, such as that portrayed in the story. We may read this story with an open mind and curiosity to what it may bring. With this young protagonist Lessing is not being predictable. Similarly to what the curious eye sees when we visit an orchard or a garden, although we may not appreciate it at first, there is life everywhere, more movements of insects, plants and soil than the human eye can meet, all of which give life to the orchard’s inhabitants. Lessing offers a protagonist who learns to observe and listen to the course of life in this territory around her and intimately, a space where wild life and humanity stems. Placed in the context of Lessing’s African Stories, it remains an extraordinary piece of narrative fiction in a variety of respects.

An audacious example of a girl’s desire to grow up within a stifling atmosphere (regardless of it taking place in the open air), this story has the ability to surprise, as educational and cultural notions are contested in the portrayal of a girl’s pursuit for agency through self-discovery and self-education. The story is set in the context of the colonial past entangled with a postcolonial subjectivity that problematizes variables such as time and space. The protagonist is invested in building up a life that confronts her parents’, which was traversed by the burdens and suffering they endured as white settlers living a historical timeline impacted by colonial past and the signs of a decaying Empire, from which it was (for them) impossible to escape. In the story, her present and future life should be shaped out of the influence of the imperial past and, as with her pomegranate tree, far from the place this story emerged. The young protagonist is subject to a certain degree of oppression, but also reaches out for emancipation. She was born in the periphery, and the setting in which she is immersed pushes her to leave in order to become independent, just as Lessing did when she left Africa to settle in London in 1949. This open-ended story epitomises Lessing’s conception of the transition process from childhood to

adulthood as intertwining passages from innocence to maturity. Lessing demolishes ideas of correctness by presenting a girl who is not as dependent on her parents' control and direction as she would be expected to be due to her age and isolation in the community that she inhabits. While she is preparing to recognise and experience her own sensuality, she gets to know herself and recognises the world around her. In this observing and learning process, she evaluates, decides and prepares to manage the scope of her relationships with others, including those with William and her mother. To fulfil her narrative purpose, Lessing presents the family garden as an Eden-like educational space, a metaphor for a classroom that is home to the development of learning and teaching processes, as well as vital processes that reflect different cognitive, physical and emotional experiences. In this space, the protagonist learns the texture of the fabric of which her environment is made. Furthermore, she learns about the world and herself. Lessing's pedagogical intent was visible from her early narrative works, and has a clear, strong presence in this story, which has not been studied from this point of view before. I hope that rereading Lessing's African Stories, and specifically this short story, will widen the scope of the existing critical contributions on Lessing's corpus of African Stories and on the pedagogical turn in her narrative works.

## Notes

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1. Originally in *The Habit of Loving* (1957) and later in *The Sun between Their Feet. Collected African Stories. Volume Two* (1973 and 1994). This article uses the 1994 edition. More recently, "Flavours of Exile" was included in the volume *The Garden of Reading. Contemporary Short Fiction about Gardens and Gardening* (2012), edited by Michele Slung.

2. Carrington's painting is currently on display at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, England.

3. According to Joanne Moorhead, Carrington's cousin and biographer, Lessing was Carrington's favourite writer (2017).

4. Elsewhere, I have discussed the close relationship between Lessing's desire to acquire a solid knowledge base and the

development of her identity as a writer. The interpretation provided was that she decided to consciously create a cultural education for herself that would compensate for the fact that she had left formal education at the age of 14. This would make up for any possible shortcomings and reinforce her learning process with a view to becoming a professional writer (see García Navarro 2019).

5. See <http://www.fpa.es/en/princess-of-asturias-awards/laureates/2001-doris-lessing.html?especifica=0>.

6. First included in *Five* (1953) and later in the collection entitled *This Was the Old Chief's Country* (1994).

7. Capitalised in the original.

8. This was increasingly more common as of 1957, close to the end of

rationing after the Second World War. See <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Rationing-in-World-War-Two/>.

9. For further understanding of trees and gardens traditionally seen as sanctuary, see, for example, Cooper (2017: 2-12), and Sewald and Freuler (2019: 135-146).

10. The presence of the uncanny also appears in other stories in the same

collection, such as "Girls and Plants." For further knowledge on the uncanny, see Arias (2012).

11. I use the same word of the work "Unsubmissive Plant" by Remedios Varo. In the painting (1961), Varo, who was a colleague and great friend of Carrington's, highlights, as Carrington did, the importance of a small plant in bloom. In Varo's painting this is done in contrast to a landscape of mathematical formulae.

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