

**DORIS LESSING'S
"LITTLE TEMBI" AND
POST-COLONIAL
CRITICISM**

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RESUMO. As estratégias do colonialismo, inclusive a degradação e a inferiorização do sujeito colonial, são analisadas no conto "Little Tembi", de Doris Lessing. Investiga-se a maneira pela qual um menino africano é outremizado por fazendeiros brancos e a resistência que ele demonstra contra o sistema colonial e a política de apartheid através da dissimulação e do crime.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Pós-colonialismo, Doris Lessing, resistência

ABSTRACT. Colonial strategies, including degradation and the othering of the colonial subject are analyzed in the short story "Little Tembi" by Doris Lessing. The manner an African boy is othered by white plantation owners and his resistance against the colonial and apartheid system through sly civility and crime are investigated.

KEY WORDS: Post-colonialism, Doris Lessing; resistance

COLONIALISM AND EMPIRE

The first accounts about colonialism in the Mediterranean are narrated in Antiquity, followed by Renaissance colonialism of the 16th Century, with their apex in the 19th and 20th centuries which established and extended the British Empire around the globe. Colonialism is an essentially physical and ideologically violent process legitimized by powerful discourse. It is well known that more than 85% of the world was colonized by Europeans by the time of World War I. The demise of the empire after World War II brought independence to many former British colonies. Surely this situation provided a rich material for the arts and prompted the appearance of high quality post-colonial literature. Consequently, post-colonial writers could, even before independence of their countries, denounce the degradation state and the atrocities caused by the colonizers supported by the false idea of civilizing the "uncivilized" ones in their social, economic, political, racial, cultural, moral and psychological spheres.

Post-colonial literature is connected with the past as a historical document, but also with the present, since political independence may be elusive due to the hegemony of the U.S.A. A colonized country, of course, absorbs social, economic, political and cultural features from the colonizer

that are really hard to get rid of. This delicate situation, which prompts the hegemony of one nation over the other, is one of the main subjects related to post-colonial literature, besides issues on diaspora, transculturalization, post-modernism and globalization. Thus, the writers' strong political commitment is manifested in post-colonial literature, which proves to be necessary for the rise of national and political consciousness of formerly every colonized nations.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the short story "Little Tembi" from a post-colonial point of view, taking into consideration racism and the South African policy of apartheid in spite of the colonizers' "goodwill". The choice of "Little Tembi" (1986), written by the writer Doris Lessing, is justified because it shows clearly the mechanism of power and discourse in post-colonial literature.

DORIS LESSING AND HER WORK

Doris Lessing was born in Persia (now Iran) in 1919 of British parents. When she was six, her parents moved to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) where they farmed unsuccessfully. Lessing published several volumes of short fiction, plays, memoirs, poetry and essays. Although she has lived in England for about fifty years, her fiction deals on Africa's affairs and her early years there. Her first novel *The Grass Singing*, appeared in 1950 and, later on, she published her five-volume *Children of Violence* (1952-1969), *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999) and *The sweetest dream* (2001) (Ross, 1999).

COLONIALISM AND POST-COLONIAL LITERATURE

Post-colonial literature in English is nowadays considered one of the most important and innovative kind of literature of the postmodern period (Iyer, 1993). According to Ashcroft et al. (1989), the term "post-colonial" is used to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization up to the present, since a nation that passed through such a process will never remain the same. It will have to live with the scars left in society and culture even after

political independence, which frequently does not mean independence of the mind.

In order to colonize a country, the colonizer country uses a colonial discourse with the aim of legitimatizing colonization, always with the aim of degrading the other: the colonized "subject", in fact an object in the hands of the colonizer and its ideology.

COLONIAL DISCOURSE

Said's *Orientalism*, based on Foucault's discourse, examined the ways, in which colonial discourse operated as an instrument of power. His views initiated the colonial discourse theory in 1980, followed by Homi Bhabha, who pointed the inherent vulnerability of the colonial discourse. Discourse is a system of statements within which the world can be known, whereas dominant groups in society constitute the field of truth by imposing specific knowledge, disciplines and values upon dominated groups. Thus, colonial discourse is a set of signs and practices that organize social existence and reproduction within colonial relationships. Consequently, colonial discourse is a system of knowledge and beliefs about the world within which acts of colonization take place. It is generated within the society and cultures of the colonizer and establishes how the colonized must see themselves. As a consequence, it creates a deep conflict between the previous kinds of knowledge of the colonized and those imposed by the colonizer. Rules of inclusion and exclusion operate on the superiority of the colonizer's culture, history, language, arts, politics and social conventions. In a word, a "superior" race endeavors to civilize a "primitive" race.

Needless to say, colonial discourse is very powerful and dangerous, since the colonized subject is rarely aware of the duplicity of his/her position. Contradicting this discourse implies punishment and a threat of being seen as eccentric or abnormal. Colonial discourse, thus, consists of strategies developed by the colonizer to depreciate the colonized. Its aim is to legitimize the conquest of the colony and the status of the colonized as a subaltern and an object.

RACE, OTHER/OTHER, SUBALTERN

The terms race, other and subaltern are derived from the European hegemonic position, and justified the slavery from the 16th century, supported by the idea of a colonial world inhabited by people “naturally” inferior, destined to work for the white European colonizer. According to the European colonizer, the naturally inferior condition of the colonized was unchangeable and “proved” in the 19th century by Darwin’s theories on the survival of the fittest.

According to Ashcroft et al. (1998), “race” is a term for the classification of human beings into physically, biologically and genetically distinct groups. Race is connected with the rise of colonialism, since the division of human society in this way is inextricable from the need of colonial power to establish dominance over colonized and, therefore, justify the imperial enterprise. Race and colonialism developed a binary distinction between “civilized” and “primitive”, or rather, the hierarchization of human types. The colonial oppression is not an invention of imperialism, but became its supportive idea owing to the idea of superiority that generated the emergence of a race as a concept of dominance and enlightenment. Nevertheless, race is considered a cultural rather than a biological phenomenon, the product of historical processes not of genetically determined physical differences.

Further, the colonized are characterized as “other” through imperial discourse as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. The terms Other/other used in post-colonial theory is derived from the analysis of the formation of subjectivity by Lacan (1901-1981).

In post-colonial theory the “other” refers to the colonized subject, marginalized by imperial discourse and identified by their difference from the colonizer. The Other, in whose gaze the subject gains identity, is the hegemonic “being” who fabricates the other through language, gaze and desire. The Other can be compared to the imperial centre, discourse or the empire itself, since it provides the terms in

which the colonized subject gains a sense of personal identity as "other". It becomes the ideological framework in which the colonized subject may come to understand the world. In colonial discourse, the subjectivity of the colonized is continually located in the gaze of the imperial Other. Thus, the colonial discourse is ambivalent: both processes of "othering" occur at the same time: the colonized is a "child" of the empire and a primitive and degraded subject of imperial discourse. The construction of the dominant imperial Other occurs in the same process by which the colonial others emerge.

The term "subaltern", adopted from Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), refers to those groups in society subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes and denied access to "hegemonic" power. The subaltern notion has as its main terms the differences between class, caste, age, gender, race, office, religion, highly supported by the hegemony of British colonialism or the European elite. According to Bonnici (2003), the term subaltern can be used to describe the colonized object. The colonized practically did not have means to present itself or access to culture or social organization after the colonization.

RESISTANCE

Resistance represents the recovery of the oppressed colonial subaltern subject. Resistance occurs when the colonized recovers his/her voice and his/her former subjectivity. Resistance implies extreme courage, since it means going against the grain, or rather, against vulnerable and incoherent imperial discourse, which can be undermined. Its apex occurs when a whole nation has the courage to go against the colonial discourse imposed. When this happens, the country gains political independence, although it is imperative to conquer the independence of the mind from colonial discourse. Resistance's methods adopted against the colonizer or elite are extremely important, and the question whether the subaltern may speak is the most important one. The post-colonial discourse and the language's appropriation by the

subaltern are ways whose marginalized voice can be heard. Subjectivity is built by ideology (Althusser), language (Lacan) and discourse (Foucault), since any act of the subject is a consequence of these factors, involving the identity's constitution in the division Other/other imposed by colonialism. (Todorov, 1991).

THE CONTEXT OF 'LITTLE TEMBI'

"Little Tembi" belongs to *Collected African Stories* (1986). The collection presents features of post-colonial literature and deals strongly with the matter of apartheid in South Africa. Its action takes place during the 1950s, at the height of the segregationist regime. It may be said that apartheid meant a new mode of colonialism, since in South Africa, the Negroes, the great majority, were discriminated by a white British and Dutch-descendant minority. This situation generated racism, oppression, degradation and objectification of the Negro by the white man, who is the only subject. Such situation, of course, led to resistance from the oppressed part. Apartheid was implemented in the 1960s through the Population Registration Act of 1950, which classified all South Africans as Bantu (black Africans), colored (mixed race), white and, later, Asian (Indian and Pakistani). The Group Areas Act of 1950 established residential and business sections in urban areas for each race, and others areas for several ethnicities. The Land Acts of 1954-1955 completed a similar Land Acts adopted in 1913 and 1936. As a result, more than 80% of South Africa's land became the property of the white minority. However, in the face of such injustices, during the 1960s, international censure forced South Africa to withdraw from the Commonwealth and the country became isolated. A real shift of policy was made by South African's president F. W. de Klerk in 1990-91 who repealed the apartheid policy, especially the infamous the Population Registration Act. Total Negroes enfranchisement was finally conquered when Nelson Mandela (1994-1999) became South Africa's first democratically elected Negro president (New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1993, p.477).

POST-COLONIAL CRITICISM OF "LITTLE TEMBI"

The context of "Little Tembi" is the South Africa of 1950. It deals with racism supported by apartheid's policy in South Africa within the delicate relationship of the white colonizer vis-à-vis the Negroes. Willie McCluster, Scottish born but raised in South Africa, and his wife Jane McCluster represent the white European colonizer established in the colony. Willie is a farmer and Jane is a nurse who works in a old dairy turned into a dispensary. Their relationship with their workers is unequal: being white Europeans, they feel superior to the South African Negroes, their employees, considered inferior at all levels.

The particular point to be explored is the relationship between Jane and a Negro child: "Little Tembi", whom she saved from death when he was still a baby. Since, she had problems in having children of her own at the time, she practically adopted the child. However, after giving birth to her children, she simply put Tembi aside. Thus, he became only a Negro boy whom she saved from death; on the other hand, her white children were much more important than him. Tembi, however, liked her and refused to be treated as an inferior subject, even being still a very young child; as he was used to frequent the farmer's house. Due to her indifference and the clear difference established by her towards him, he starts to resist and puts himself as a subject in relation to Jane and Willie.

EUROPEAN WHITES COLONIZERS AND COLONIZED NEGROES

Any situation of colonization implies an unfair relationship between colonizer and colonized, since it is always supported by the unfair, binary and hegemonic colonial discourse and by the unfair binary opposition between the two parts. When the racial factor is also presented in a colonial situation, binarism is double: colonizer/colonized: white/negro. This is the delicate situation of "Little Tembi". Depreciatively Jane remarks on the Negroes she treats at her dispensary may be appreciated

'They are just like children, and appreciate what you do for them'. So, when she had taken a thorough, diagnosing kind of look at the farm natives, she exclaimed, 'Poor things!' and set about turning an old dairy into a dispensary. Her husband was pleased; it would save money in the long run by cutting down illness in the compound. (LESSING, 1986, p.99)

The passage above from the beginning of the short story is essential to understand the mentality of Jane and of her husband towards the natives. She strongly objectifies and degrades the Negroes by comparing them to "children", thus, minors, who need protection and boost her ego. She calls them "Poor things!", who demanded charity, besides being treated as "things" whose maladies she has to diagnose. Although "an old dairy" was turned into a dispensary in order to care for them, financial interests were at the bottom since "it would save money". Thus, the colonizer's exploitation of the colonized is clearly illustrated since the workers had their health treated in order to work more and better. This meant economic profit and fewer expenses.

Another salient point is the fact that Jane is a nurse, a doctor for the Negroes since she cures them and prevents them from being sick. She has the power to cure and Willie has the power to employ them, offer them a job, synonym of money and consequently food. The Europeans are, thus, at the centre and the Negroes at the margin: Other/other. The other, even living in his country, has been practically usurped by the apartheid's policy, which destined more than 80% of the fertile land of South Africa to the white colonizers...

Although the colonizers are not overtly hated, in fact, Jane is called "The Goodhearted One" by the natives, they does not realize that behind her veiled generosity there are strong material interests. Similar to Willie, she does not care much about the colonized subjects. She is only softer towards them than he is, but both considered the inferiority of the Negroes as a natural factor.

THE WHITE COLONIZER'S VIEW ON TEMBI

As Jane McCluster is only softer than her husband Willie McCluster towards the Negroes, it may be said that her

racism is much more veiled than his. On the other hand, in Tembi's mentality there is no idea of a color bar. Although he works for her, just to fill a gap in her life, when she gives birth for the first time, she forgets Tembi completely:

Little Tembi was brought by his mother up to the house every day for a month, partly to make sure he would not relapse, partly because Jane had grown to love him. When he was quite well, and no longer come to the clinic, Jane would ask the cookboy after him, and sometimes sent a message that he should be fetched to see her (LESSING, 1986, p. 102-103).

On the birth of her children, she becomes absorbed by them, although she does not forget Tembi altogether. "Once she caught sight of Tembi's mother walking along one of the farm road, leading a child by the hand, and said: 'But where's Tembi?' Then she saw the child was Tembi. (LESSING, 1986, p. 103). The above proves the objectification of the Negro child Tembi by the white colonizer Jane, who utilizes him as an object when she is in need and puts him aside when she does not. The Negro is not considered a human being with human feelings.

Things come to a head when Tembi, still very young, works as a herd boy on the farm. Tembi falls asleep on a hot day and the herd destroys a plantation. Consequently, he receives a "stern lecture" from Willie. But when this happens again within a month, Tembi is beaten lightly by Willie with a stick. Besides the unfair act by Willie, the colonizer practices a harsh discipline which goes against South African customs of more tolerance with children. After the beating Jane only asks Willie: "'Is it over'" asked Jane, appearing from the house." (LESSING, 1986, p. 107). She really does not prevent Willie from doing so, but shuns her children from seeing it.

The matter becomes more serious when Tembi steals some things from the McCluster's house and is beaten by Willie until the boy bleeds. The difference between Africans and Europeans is stressed by the beating, since it is a European custom to beat a child that does something wrong, which, it is supposed, will prevent him/her from doing it a second time. By the beating Willie intends to show Tembi that he is the superior, the master, the colonizer, the dominant white man.

Tembi is the child, inferior, employee, the colonized, the Negro who must obey the superior. It is interesting to note the contradiction: while South Africans, considered “uncivilized” by Europeans, and thus, wild and primitive, do not punish their children by beating them, beating of children was widely practiced by the “civilized” Europeans.

RESISTANCE

In spite of the objectification and degradation, Tembi shows himself a subject since his very early age. He goes against the colonial discourse and fears neither Willie nor Jane. The first strong proof is the manner he talks to Willie. Maybe his courage comes from the fact of feeling himself protected by Jane’s attention towards him when he is younger. Since he does not seem to accept that he is inferior, he wants to make part in the farm labor, frequent the house of his masters, be equal, and refuses to be inferior to them. Tembi shows himself very bold for a Negro child of six, towards Willie, his master:

‘And now, my big man, what money do you want?’ At this Tembi dropped his head still lower, twisted his feet in the dust, and muttered: ‘Five shillings!’ ‘Five shillings a month!’ exclaimed Willie indignantly ‘What next! Why the ten-year-old piccanins get that much.’ And then, feeling Jane’s hand on his arm, he said hurriedly: ‘Oh, all right, four and sixpence’ (LESSING, 1986, p. 104-105).

The boldness of Tembi decentralizes Willie when he establishes how much he wants to earn to work to him: more than a boy of his age has ever earned. His boldness makes Willie ironical towards him and ridicules his inferior situation of child, Negro and colonizer by calling him “piccanins” or “little black child,” a depreciative word. When Jane intervenes, Willie gives him almost the amount he has asked, or rather, a higher salary than a child of his age may earn. However, he constantly asks for increase in salary very boldly. Even after leaving the cattle stray twice, Willie raises his salary on the boy’s insistence, which is followed by another similar demand, going against the rule that another rise would be possible only after a year. This insistence by Tembi destabilized Willie’s

position as master, but reinforces the resistance and the subjectivity of the supposed subaltern child. "This time the listening natives made sounds of amused protest, the lad was forgetting himself. (...) 'If you don't stop this nonsense, I'll tell your father to teach you a lesson where it hurts.' Tembi's eyes glowed angrily and he attempted to argue, but Willie dismissed him curtly, turning to the next laborer" (LESSING, 1986, p. 108).

Tembi becomes angry as a subject and does not accept being warned. On the other hand, Jane emphasizes his inferiority by giving him fruits and cake in order to make him forget the matter. These points show their differences in interests and position, the othering of Tembi, who stays at the back door of the house: "Sometimes she was too occupied to go herself to the back door. She would send her servant with an apple or a few sweets." (LESSING, 1986, p. 109), while he said "'Missus, my missus, I come to see you only'" (LESSING, 1986, p. 109).

Affirming himself as a subject, Tembi starts stealing things from her house, such as her diamond engagement ring, a pearl brooch, a pair of scissors. Stealing represents Tembi's protest and resistance, a way to affirm his subjectivity in face of his objectification. Since he is just a child and does not know the real value of things, Jane thinks he deserves "a good talking-to". Willie, however, decides to beat him once more. When Jane gives him a job on her vegetable garden, he seems to conform himself. However, the problem of the native's sly civility comes to the fore. When she starts to tell him about her children, the differences between him and the white children are given in an explicit racist tone:

She would talk to him about her own children, and how they were growing, and would be soon be going to school in the city. [...] he must earn good money so that he could buy shoes to keep his feet from the germ-laden dust; how he must be honest, always tell the truth and be obedient to the white people. While she was in the garden he would follow her around, his hoe trailing forgotten in his hand, his eyes fixed on her [...] she took to bringing him her own children's books, when they were too worn for use in the nursery. 'You must learn to read [...]. Then when you want to get a job, you will earn more wages if you can say: 'Yes, missus, I can read and write'. You can take messages on the telephone then, and write down orders so that you don't forget them (LESSING, 1986, p. 112-113).

Thus, for Jane a Negro child has only to learn how to read and write, while white children should go to school. This is reinforced when she mentions the “virtues” of Negroes for the benefit of white people: “[They] must be honest, always tell the true and be obedient to the white people.” Thus, there is a strong contrast between a white child destined to study and to become a boss and a Negro child who must only learn how to write and read in order to work as a subaltern and earn money by serving the white people.

An attempt at subjectivity by Tembi may be seen in the episode of the bicycle. As a bold colonial subject he asks Willie to be allowed to buy a bicycle. “‘No’, said Willie. ‘And what does a piccanin like you want with a bicycle? A bicycle is for a big man.’” However, next day, their eldest child’s bicycle vanishes from the house and is found in the compound leaning against Tembi’s hut. When accused, Tembi says: ‘I don’t know why I stole it. I don’t know’. And he ran off crying, into the trees.” (LESSING, 1986, p. 114). Tembi can not accept being treated differently from white people, since they have a bicycle, but he, a Negro, may not have one. He therefore steals the bicycle in order to protest and distances himself from the farm.

When four years later, at fifteen, he comes back to the farm, houses start being burgled, including McCluster’s. The series of robberies increases the veiled racism and raises the hatred between the European white colonizers and the colonized Negroes:

The district gossiped about the robberies; and because of them, the anger lying dormant between white and black, always ready to flare up, deepened in an ugly way. There was hatred in the white people’s voices when they addressed their servants, that futile anger, for even if their personal servants were giving information to the thieves, what could be done about? The most trusted servant could turn out to be a thief. [...] Jane found herself saying one day: ‘Why do we do it? Look how I spend my time nursing and helping these natives! What thanks do I get? They aren’t grateful for anything we do for them.’ (LESSING, 1986, p. 116-117)

Really, the whole situation has been caused by the colonizers who depreciated the natives at all levels. The wave of thefts is actually a symbol, an answer, a rebellion against

their imposed superiority. It brings also fear and paranoia, since it is only Tembi who is stealing, but they are thinking that a gang of Negroes are doing it. Since the Negroes are afraid of the whites because they depend on them to work, thus, to eat, to live, now the situation is reversed: the whites are afraid of the Negroes, being imprisoned in their own house by the fear caused by fifteen-year old Tembi. However, Willie says: "If one chooses to live in a damned country like this, one has to take the consequences" (LESSING, 1986, p. 117).

The white people are consequently paying because of the degradation they have brought to Negroes and by the racism triggered by the apartheid policy. The superiority stance is inverted, the oppressed are now oppressing, scaring and, therefore, showing themselves superior. Surprised by this supposed ingratitude of Tembi, Jane asks him: "[...] Tembi, why do you steal?' Tembi hung his head and said: 'I don't know, missus'. 'But you must know.' There was no reply, the tears poured down Tembi's cheeks" (LESSING, 1986, p. 121).

Due to his extremely young age, Tembi fails to formulate a real resistance to white people's depreciation of the natives. Instinctively, however, he knows and feels that the relationship between white and Negroes is wrong and something has to be done. She says to Willie: "'There's something horrible about it all', she said restlessly. 'I can't forget it'. And finally, 'what did he want, Willie? What is it he was wanting all this time?'" (LESSING, 1986, p. 123)

Tembi is neither a criminal nor a thief, but he is suffering the psychological consequences of racism. As he matures the racial difference becomes clearer and he cannot bear being treated as a subaltern colonial subject. The fact of robbing white people suggests that he wants to be like them, to have the same rights, to be equal, since in his mind he is a human being like them and not different, just because of skin color. Although the situation he lives in condemns him to marginalization as a consequence of the hegemony of the white colonizer, his attempt and refusal to be considered an inferior shows the resistance of the excluded and subaltern colonial subject.

CONCLUSION

Lessing's short story shows the life of a colonized subject damaged by the fact of being colonized and different skin color. Although he suffers a kind of veiled racism at the beginning of the story, later on he starts to feel and understand the outrage explicitly. What is very interesting is that he was a very young child, but faced his white masters Willie and Jane McCluster and did not admit being inferior to them. In spite of his forced inferior position, he talks on an equal base to his oppressors. Although sometimes he manages to hide the subjectivity, he simply has "something inside him", which is not degradable. Even living in a country with such a segregationist regime as the Apartheid system, he does not accept it as natural at any moment. He tries to resist to the white European "superior" mentality. As a reaction against deep subalternity, unfair social politics and racism, he becomes a thief due to the marginalizing system and, to make matters worse, the white people feel themselves as victims of ungrateful Negroes and it turns the social problem bigger, but not unsolved: "I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." (Nelson Mandela's statement from the dock in the Rivonia Trial.)

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