

Cultural Memory in Doris Lessing's Fiction

An analysis of *The Grass is Singing*, *Alfred and Emily* and *Martha Quest* in light of cultural memory studies

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Introduction

In this MA thesis I will compare and contrast three novels written by Doris Lessing and show their importance to the field of memory studies. Doris Lessing is often seen as a feminist writer, and much has been written about her work from that perspective (Altman 15).

However, there is more to Lessing's work than feminist writing alone. Many of her novels, and in particular the three novels that I will discuss in this thesis, deal with racism and colonialism as well as with gender issues. In her novels, these specific issues are approached from the field of memory studies. The novels that I will discuss here are *The Grass is Singing*, *Alfred and Emily* and *Martha Quest*. In all three books Lessing uses her own memories to create an image of white colonial culture in South Rhodesia and with that adds to the field of cultural memory studies.

Although cultural memory studies has been a growing field within literary studies, not much has been written yet about Doris Lessing's work in this light. In all three of the novels that I will analyze however, interesting forms of cultural memory and memory in general are to be found. In *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing touches upon the notion of cultural identity and shows how cultural memories are formed within an isolated society such as the white settler communities in colonial South Rhodesia. In *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing uses another aspect that is part of cultural memory studies, which is the creation of an alternative history. In *Martha Quest*, Lessing plays with the idea of nostalgia and shows that this can also be a part of a cultural memory.

In this thesis I will show how Lessing uses these several aspects of cultural memory to underline her postcolonial and feminist work. In the first chapter, I will explain what cultural memory studies are, and how I will use that theory to help analyze the three novels I have chosen. The second chapter will then provide an overview of the history of South Rhodesia or

Zimbabwe, as it is now called. Then, three subsequent chapters will provide the analyses of the three novels.

The Grass is Singing (1950) is Lessing's first novel and was received very well by literary critics. It is still an important novel, because Lessing describes the influence of cultural memory on an individual. In addition to that, Lessing discusses the idea of a cultural identity, and specifically the cultural feminine identity of a white woman in South Rhodesia during the first half of the 20th century.

Martha Quest (1952) is the first book of the series *Children of Violence* which Lessing wrote between 1952 and 1993. The series tells the life story of Martha Quest, from a young teenager to her adult life in Great Britain. The first novel, *Martha Quest*, tells the story of Martha's escape from her parent's farm to go live and work in the city until her (first) marriage.

Alfred and Emily (2008) is one of Lessing's more recent books, as it was published in 2008, almost sixty years after *The Grass is Singing*. The novel is half fiction, half memoir and focuses on the life of her parents. In the first half, Lessing tries to imagine what her parents' lives would have looked like had there never been two world wars. The second half consists of Lessing's memoirs, and she describes the lives of her parents as they were.

The analyses of the three novels will be the groundwork for this thesis. The theory that I will use to analyze the novels, is the theory of cultural memory studies. The first chapter will therefore give an overview of the main aspects of the theory, which I apply to the analyses of the novels. Aspects such as counter-history, alternative history, cultural identity and cultural memory itself, will be explained in the first chapter and then analyzed with reference to Lessing's fiction in the subsequent chapters. As will be explained in the first chapter as well, it is important to add a historical context. First of all, it is easier to understand Lessing's fiction if the reader has some general knowledge of the history of South Rhodesia.

Secondly, it is important to give an historical overview, because it will add to the critical context of cultural memory studies. Memory cannot be analyzed without a historical framework, as I will explain in the first chapter.

In her fiction, Lessing uses her own memories to create a story that will help the reader understand the situation of the people in South Rhodesia. She connects history and memory, by making sure that her memory is put in a critical, historical context. She also uses her memory to write fiction that is critical of British colonial history, and of the way in which that past is nowadays remembered.

I will show that in all three novels, Lessing's own personal memories are very important. She uses them for her fiction and I will show that many of her fictional characters possess autobiographical elements. It is therefore fitting to explain a little about Doris Lessing's own life.

Doris Lessing was born in 1919. She is of British descent, however, as her father was stationed in Persia, Lessing was born in the middle-east. After an exhibition about the farming lands in South-Rhodesia, the family moved there and her father built a farm (de Mul 35). In South Rhodesia the family lived in total isolation, and farming the lands was harder than her father had imagined. Her mother was used to the city, had led a rather comfortable life in Persia as well, and had difficulty getting used to the dry and hot lands of South Rhodesia. A few years before the publication of her first novel, Lessing moved to Great Britain. During the 1950's, Lessing was not allowed to enter South Rhodesia. She was considered a communist and was not welcome because of her politically engaged writings (de Mul 36). After the independence of Zimbabwe (former South Rhodesia) Lessing was finally allowed to visit the country again.

In this thesis I will look at the way in which personal and collective (or cultural) memories are described in the novels. Besides that, I will compare the novels with each other.

Are there differences between the older and recent books concerning Lessing's use of memories?

Through my analyses of the three novels, I will show that Doris Lessing uses cultural memory to bring a deeper understanding of the colonial situation in South Rhodesia.

Chapter 1 Cultural Memory Studies

Over the last 25 years the interest in the field of cultural memory studies has drastically expanded. However, interest in the field of memory began to grow in the end of the nineteenth century. In the beginning of the 20th century in psychology as well as anthropology interest arose in the social constructions of individual and collective memories (Olick 107).

History has always been known for its factual approach to the past. Only through critical analysis can a form of objective narrative concerning the past be acquired. However, as in different scientific fields, such as psychology and neurology, the interest in social constructions began to grow, as the recollection of individual and shared memories of historic events became more important (Cubitt 2).

The field of cultural memory studies is however not yet, and will possibly never be, “a coherent and unified field of enquiry”, as it is practiced in different disciplines (Cubitt 2). It is therefore difficult to provide a theoretical framework that will include all aspects of memory studies, as it is practiced in so many discourses. Instead, I will try to give a brief overview of the main concepts used in cultural memory studies, and use them in my analysis of Doris Lessing’s work.

The concept of a memory is very broad, hence there are many discourses in which such a subject can be used. In the sciences for instance, such as neurology, memory is approached as a concept that is formed by the workings of our brain. It is about the production of memory, and the mechanisms underlying that production. In psychology, memory and the recovery of memory are used as methods to cure or heal a person’s mental health, and are always thought of as an individual’s experiences. In cultural memory studies, memories are approached as constructs of social and cultural communities or groups.

In his book *History and Memory* Cubitt researches the definition of memory and its relation to history. As he poses the question “what is history”, he also provides multiple

answers, all of which are applicable to cultural memory studies. For this thesis, his combined answers to his own question are the definition of memory. Memory is the survival as well as the reconstruction of past experiences, it can be both individual and shared, and it can be linked to culture, religion or social institutions (Cubitt 2). It is important to note that for a shared memory, past memories do not necessarily have to be experienced by all individuals in the particular group. A shared memory is the “mechanism through which we feel pride, pain or shame with regards to events that happened to our groups before we joined them” (Olick 123). Within cultural memory studies, the memories that link the past to the future are of great importance. Scholars within this field look at the echoes memories leave on the present, rather than describing a situation in the past in a historical way.

As Paul Ricoeur explains in his article “Memory-History-Forgetting” history and memory are interwoven. For memory, history serves as a critical framework, in which memories can be either confirmed or contested. History offers facts, searches for the causes or motives behind a certain happening. It is critical in the sense that this procedure of searching for probable causes in relation to facts requires a critical view by the historian (Ricoeur 477). Memory is the factor that can add consciousness or meaning to an historical event. Whereas history can separate itself from interpretation, meaning and feeling, memory is inevitably linked with these concepts.

Besides the individual memories that people have of the past, Ricoeur also discusses the collective memory. Collective memory is used to describe the shared memories of a group of people bound by nationality, culture, religion, gender or any other binding factor. Olick et al. describe collective memory as the “active past that forms our identities” (Olick 111). They agree with Ricoeur that history merely discusses facts and therefore does not have the power to relate to society. A collective memory bases itself on history, but through the consciousness of the “collective” or the group that remembers, meaning is added to history. Olick et al.

argue that the term “collective memory” may be too broad. In memory studies, both collective memory and cultural memory are used interchangeably. However, they argue that a collective memory can also include official memory, family memory and vernacular memory, whereas cultural memory only focuses on the shared social and cultural memories of a particular group (Olick 112). For this thesis, the focus will lie on the part of collective memory that is cultural or social.

From the beginning of the use of the term, cultural memory seems to be interwoven with nationality, nationalism and identity (Olick 116). As societies became more aware of their pasts, and began glorifying them, a strong sense of cultural heritage arose. With the glorification of the historical and cultural past, the idea of white supremacy grew in European countries. In colonial history, facts show that these countries expanded throughout South America, the East and Africa. Cultural memory studies show that many settlers had a mutual feeling of western, and therefore white, supremacy. This aspect will be further discussed in the analyses of the novels.

With a strong recognition of one’s cultural heritage comes the forming of a cultural identity. Cultural practices can overlap, but the idea of a shared identity is bound to the specific group in which an individual lives. For instance, the cultural identities of British settlers in South Rhodesia and the British who stayed in Great Britain are different from one another. British settlers may have held on to certain cultural practices, such as clothing or eating, but their cultural identities grew apart over the years. Whereas the British became more liberal in their idea about cultural (white) supremacy, the British settlers in South Rhodesia clung to their idea of superiority over the black inhabitants of Africa.

The shift the British, and with them all European countries, made after the end of the colonial period, when they reviewed their ideas of white superiority, is an example of another cultural phenomenon that belongs to cultural memory. Olick et al. call this development social

amnesia, “where the past is no longer obviously connected to the present” (Olick 116). As the cultural identity of British society changed, they could no longer (as a group) identify themselves with the ideas and ideals of their past.

Ricoeur also finds another factor that can inspire social or cultural amnesia. Olick et al. simply regard amnesia as the past of a country or culture that is no longer connected to the present, because of cultural changes, and is therefore forgotten. Ricoeur, however, has a less positive view. For him, amnesia is closely connected to the deliberate act of forgetting. Forgetting, according to Ricoeur, can be subdivided into two categories; active and passive forgetting. Whereas passive forgetting is the result of passing time and cannot be avoided as such, active forgetting is a “strategy of avoidance (...)”, where people choose not to think about or inquire after atrocities of the past. This active forgetting, or “escapist forgetting” is mostly found in groups that share a memory of a violent past where their group was the perpetrator of that violence. The liberalization of British ideas about racially mixed societies are then part of a strategy of avoidance, and the fact that the ideas that initiated the segregation systems were born out of their former colonial ideologies are actively forgotten. However, looking at both explanations of social amnesia, it seems that the most plausible definition of the phenomenon would lie somewhere in between.

Both Olick et al. and Ricoeur mention another factor, guilt, which is connected to social amnesia, but imply that it is not of great importance. However, guilt can have a major influence on the way a cultural memory is repressed. The idea that guilt, or the recognition that mistakes have been made in one’s society’s historical and cultural past, is part of cultural memory, took hold in the second half of the twentieth century (Olick 119). Colonialism, racism and two World Wars, including the Holocaust, were a turning point for the recollection of cultural memory (Olick 119). In Europe, the realization grew that a cultural memory “does not merely reflect past experiences (...) [but] it has an orientational function” (Olick 124).

This conscious approach to a cultural memory is what Ricoeur meant when he said that a memory can serve as a critical framework for history. Where history provides the facts, cultural memory adds meaning to these facts and can prevent history repeating itself. In such a case, when a cultural memory can be critically approached, guilt is the factor that enables a group or society to recognize and accept faults that have been made in the past.

Ricoeur mentions that when a society or group cannot look back at their memories of the past in a critical way, “repetition memory” occurs. The repetitive nature of the memory will not allow the holder of the memory to analyze, criticize or put that memory in perspective. Following that line, a group of people sharing such a memory will never forget until that memory is contested. Besides that, history has a better chance of repeating itself because no meaning can be taken from the recollection of the memory. This repetition memory can occur in both perpetrator and victim. The repetition memory of perpetrators does not allow for insight in past faults, and without that, faults are easily made again. For the victim, repetition memory produces a trauma, which can root itself deeply into a culture or society. In such cases, repetition memory cannot be forgotten and least of all, forgiven. Ricoeur argues that in both cases nothing is “learned” from past experience. For the perpetrator, a repetition memory can be “healed” by gaining a historical consciousness, provided by guilt and recognition. For the victim, forgiveness is a way of healing a memory. For both groups this involves the recognition of other collective memories and, with that, other perspectives on history. When a certain group has suffered and shares a cultural memory of that suffering, historical perspective can offer a chance to enhance the consciousness of the shared memory and offer a critical view of the sharing of that memory. When such a group can forgive the ‘other’ for the wrong they have done, the memory will not be forgotten, but will become a conscious memory. Both groups can remember what has happened in the past, but instead of repeating the wrong that has been done (repetitive memory) can learn not to let

something like that happen again. When such a form of shared memory is reached, Ricoeur, after Freud, calls this the “work of recollection” or the “conscious memory” (Ricoeur 479).

An example of a repetition memory can be found in present Zimbabwe. After Mugabe seized power, his memories of the way black people were treated under white rule, caused him to take hold of all white farms and force the white farmers to leave the country. He vowed to treat the white famers as they had treated him and his people in the past. However understandable such a reaction may be, the situation is not solved. As the memory cannot be analyzed and looked at from multiple points of view, including the white point of view, it cannot be forgiven and repeats itself. Even the action that follows the memory (the reaction) is a repetition because it happened before . Facts show that Mugabe’s solution to try and take revenge on the whites because of the memory of history only caused more problems for Zimbabwe, which is now one of the poorest countries in the world.

As both Olick et al., Ricoeur and Cubitt show, memory and history are connected to each other. Where cultural memory needs a factual framework, history needs a social or cultural framework. It is therefore not surprising that in most societies a nation’s history is often connected to and completed by the cultural memory of that society. However, within one society or country, different groups with different cultural memories can live next to each other. For some groups, their cultural memories cannot be linked to the country’s or society’s history, because it is already so intertwined with another group’s cultural memories. As Olick et al. say: “cultural memory is a field of cultural negation through which different stories vie for a place in history” (Olick 126). Thus, a group that cannot connect their memories to the nation’s or society’s history may contest that history by creating a “counter-history”, using their memories of the past. It is the approach to history from another perspective that challenges the dominant discourse in that county or society (Olick 126). The term counter-history would imply a historical overview of the facts that have been left out of the dominant

history, however, this does not always have to be the case. A counter-history can include facts of history, collective or personal memory, and can also be oral or written fiction. Such forms of counter-history then add to the general counter-discourse of a group of people challenging the dominant (historical) discourse in their country or nation. In the analyses of the novels, we will see that Lessing uses counter-history in order to create more space for and recognition of the cultural memories of white women living in a colonial society.

Another aspect which is connected to counter-history is alternative history. In this case, historical facts are altered, made up or left out and a “new history” is created. The film “Inglourious Basterds”¹ directed by Quentin Tarantino, for example, ends with all high Nazi officials, including Hitler himself, being either shot or burned in a French cinema in 1944, creating a “happy end” of the Second World War and thus contesting history and (cultural) memory. This “counterfactual historical speculation” is a relatively new subject within western culture, and is still criticized by many historians as interfering with their own factual approach on the past (Rosenfeld 90). However, for cultural memory studies, alternative history provides a possibility to not only analyze the memory itself, but to show what influence historical facts have on personal and cultural memories and identities as well.

Another aspect which is not mentioned by Olick or Ricoeur, but does play an important role in cultural memory studies is nostalgia. For an individual, nostalgia can mean a deep and sometimes painful longing for the (personal) past, and is considered as a common experience. In cultural memory studies, however, nostalgia is often considered as “a distorted memory of the past that is morally questionable” (Walder 939). This idea of nostalgia is especially present in colonial history. As colonialism is nowadays not considered as an aspect of history to be proud of, longing for that past is socially no longer acceptable. Most of the

¹ The words “inglorious” and “bastards” are intentionally spelled incorrectly.

novels and works now read and analyzed in (post-)colonial studies will emphasize the inequality, the racism and the dreadful aftermath of colonialism.

According to Walder, nostalgia lies somewhere between history and memory. It is a grey area in which a genuine sense of loss is felt which is neither connected to memory, nor to history (Walder 940). Nostalgic feelings can create a false memory, which is happier or better than the original experience. Besides that, nostalgia can make the (often less agreeable) facts of history decrease or disappear and thus distort the critical relation between history and memory that Ricoeur and Olick speak of.

In Doris Lessing's work, however, I will show that nostalgia does not have to change a memory and challenge historical facts. It is possible to experience nostalgia, as an individual or as a group, without affecting the critical framework. I will treat nostalgia not as a grey area in between history and memory, but place it beside memory and thus treat it as such. As long as history is taken into account as the factual structure against which nostalgia, like a memory, can be tested, nostalgia can add to the creation of a cultural memory.

Closely linked to history and cultural memory is the way in which past events are remembered. Studies of remembrance have shown that cultures remember in different ways. In Europe, for instance, remembrance is shown in memorials, national holidays, literature and museums. In other countries, the oral tradition of telling stories and creating myths is an important way of remembering. In every way of remembering, the reputation of a group or person plays an important role. The way in which a person, society or event is remembered forms the cultural memory. As Olick et al. argue: "We have a tendency (...) to exaggerate both greatness and evil" (Olick 131). In both cases, whether it is the greatness or the evil in our past, again a historical framework is needed to contest the cultural memory. For the analysis of Lessing's novels, it is important therefore to have an understanding of the

historical events. The cultural memory that is Doris Lessing's literature can thus be placed in a critical historical framework and visa versa.

Chapter 2 A Short History of Zimbabwe

In this chapter I will give a brief overview of the history of Zimbabwe. As the chapter introducing the theory of memory and cultural memory studies explained, it is important to combine factual history with collective or individual memories in order to create an objective and thorough analysis of Doris Lessing's work.

At the beginning of the 19th century Europeans started to settle in the area that now consists of Zimbabwe (South Rhodesia) and Zambia (Northern Rhodesia). At first they came as missionaries, traders and hunters but at the end of the century the Europeans had other plans in mind. The discovery of gold in Transvaal and the stories that more goldfields could be found further north, led the British to the relatively untouched lands of Zambezia (Zimbabwe and Zambia).

It was Cecil Rhodes, a well known British imperialist, together with his business partner Charles Rudd, who persuaded King Lobengula of the Ndebele to sign a treaty in 1888. This treaty gave Rhodes the monopoly for the mining of minerals throughout the Ndebele kingdom (O'Meara 10) and put Matabeleland under the influence of the British South Africa Company. This Rudd Mineral Concession caused hundreds of pioneers and settlers to come into the country by the end of the 19th century. As the British population of settlers grew, Rhodes set up expeditions to start mining for gold in the north-eastern area of Mashonaland. Although Mashonaland was not technically under the rule of Lobengula and thus was not part of the treaty, the British invaded this territory as well (Phimister 6). Because of the military force the Europeans brought with them they were able to control the area in which they had settled. After Lobengula died, the British realized that with no king to rule his people the seizure of power and control over the area became easier and they could expand to the western parts of Zambezia.

The country was given a new name, Rhodesia, after Cecil Rhodes, in 1895. At the beginning of the 20th century, Rhodesia was split up between a Northern (Zambia) and Southern (Zimbabwe) region, both still part of the British South Africa Company, but under different administration.

The British South Africa Company, set up by Rhodes and his business partners, which had been granted a Royal Charter in 1889, provided all parts of Zambezia with basic ‘administration and transport infrastructure’ (Phimister 6). The B.S.A. was also responsible for the establishment of a police force and the maintenance of ‘public works’ (Phimister 6). In 1886 work started on the building of a railway through the southern and northern parts of Rhodesia. Through shareholding in other companies and the mining laws, which gave them fifty percent of the profits of all mining companies, the B.S.A. gained their income. After the split of Southern and Northern Rhodesia, the B.S.A. continued to control both parts under different administration offices.

The British population in South Rhodesia grew steadily; Rhodesia became a “self-governing colony controlled by the small white minority” (O’Meara 12) The British South Africa Company controlled the country up to 1914, and then the charter was renewed by the British government for another ten years (O’Meara).

The reason for the growth of the white population was the increased interest in farming in the beginning of the 20th century. The first settlers came to the area of South Rhodesia mainly for the mines, but as they did not produce as much gold as was expected, British settlers turned to farming instead (Phimister 60). However, to give the British a chance of starting farming businesses, the B.S.A. had to deal with the black farmers who had had their farms on these lands even before the beginning of the British invasion. To give the white settlers a chance in setting up a business, the B.S.A. installed laws that prohibited the black Africans from farming in white areas. Reserves were set up for black Africans to live in, so

they could not compete with the white farmers. They were however allowed to buy land in certain areas outside of the reserves. The Native Reserve Commission, which administered the native Africans to the reserves, also had other ideas. Forcing the natives to live in mostly unfertile areas and making them pay taxes for their land, their huts and their cattle, impoverished them so they had no other choice than to become part of the cheap black labour force for the whites.

In the following years the white population kept growing. This British white working class consisted of farmers and railway workers, who came to South Rhodesia looking for prosperity. However, most farmers were not prepared for the South Rhodesian farming conditions, which were different from farming conditions in England. Their struggle with the land and the dry seasons impoverished many farmers, and did not bring them the wealth they expected (Phimister 140).

In the meantime the black Africans also developed in their farming. In the remote areas of the reserves, farming was still practiced traditionally, but Africans living closer to the white community slowly started using machinery following white farming example. The government in South Rhodesia wanted to prevent the uprising of a black working class, who could eventually unite and rebel against the white government, and therefore set up laws to 'break' Shona and Ndebele traditions. Teaching them 'white' farming and educating them from a Christian perspective did however not have the effect the government hoped for. Instead of 'whitening' them, they induced a feeling of resentment against the white community. The education the whites provided for the Africans made them aware of their economic importance for the country (Phimister 148).

In 1923, following a referendum in 1922, Rhodesia became a "self-governing colony controlled by the small white minority" (O'Meara 12). Fear of the growing strength of the black population caused the government to install laws which protected the settlers from

African competition (Weinrich 10). Black Africans were removed from civil service jobs, and their right to vote was withdrawn. A period of strict racial division was about to begin.

During the Great Depression many Acts for the protection of the white community were installed. As the economy was declining and the white farmers saw their profits reduced, competition from black farmers was eliminated. The Land Apportionment Act of 1931 prohibited black Africans from buying land outside of the African reserves. Besides that, the reserves were decreased in size so the fertile lands would belong to the white community. Although the Land Apportionment Act mandated total separation of whites and blacks, white farmers still needed cheap labour to work on their lands. Immigrants, including women, from Central African countries, who fled from the devastating influence the Depression had on their lands, were brought to the country following the Land Settlement Act. In addition to this, native 'Rhodesian' Africans were obliged to register for work passes following the Native Registration Act. Both Acts made sure the government could control the flow of black workers (Phimister 202) and as there were so many of them, white employers only had to pay them a fraction of the amount they would have received under normal conditions (Phimister 203).

In the 1940's a period of industrialization began for South Rhodesia. This meant that many African unemployed workers moved to the urbanized areas, where housing became a problem. Lack of proper housing, hygiene and regular income caused black railroad workers to strike in 1945 (Phimister 265). As the strike resulted in the establishment of black workers unions and discontent grew amongst the black population, the government realized it was necessary to satisfy the black workers because they needed them for the country's industries. After 1945, the governmental 'orientation pointed to integration' and the 'incorporation of Africans into the central state' (Phimister 298). In 1953, South Rhodesia became part of the Central African Federation, which also included North Rhodesia and Nyasaland. The idea of

the CAF was to create a federation of states which were neither colonies, nor self-governing white states like South Africa. With the beginning of the CAF attempts were made to reduce some discriminatory laws and “reduce the social and economic gap between the races” (Weinrich 11).

As conditions gradually improved for black industrial workers living in the cities during the 1950's, the attitude of the white settlers concerning the black Africans did not change. If anything, the feeling of the need for segregation only grew, based on the idea that an educated mass of black people with certain rights could pose an economical threat to their communities. As a result of these feelings, political organizations for white settlers were rising, as the white community became more aware of the supposed threat of the black community (Phimister 274). However, black people working in the rural areas on white farms did not see much of a change during these years (Rutherford 25). There were still too many black people searching for jobs on white farms, which resulted in poor working conditions and low wages.

The relatively liberal government party in South Rhodesia was defeated in 1962 and the new government withdrew themselves from the CAF a few months later. Although initially there were not that many ideas for changing the laws concerning blacks, the shift of governmental focus changed to the south, and the example of South Africa, where a small white minority successfully ruled a black majority², led South Rhodesia on its way to total segregation.

Racial division grew again and total segregation was installed, especially when Prime Minister Ian Smith declared the country of South Rhodesia independent in 1965. As Northern Rhodesia had been declared independent from Britain in 1964 and was renamed Zambia,

² In her article “A Question of Timing: South Africa and Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence” Sue Onslow notes that South Africa’s approval of the declaration was questionable, since they feared another ‘white supremacy state’ that could threaten their own prosperity (Onslow 130).

South Rhodesia was now called U.D.I. Rhodesia (Unilateral Declaration of Independence),³ and broke all ties with Great Britain.

Up to the 1970's the racial division grew. However, the resistance of the oppressed black community also grew. Black political organizations, such as Robert Mugabe's ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union), gained more members and posed a serious threat to the racist government led by Ian Smith (Rutherford 39).

In 1970 the Smith government declared Rhodesia a republic. The following years were chaotic. The African resistance grew rapidly and outbreaks of violence made it hard for the government to maintain order. In addition to that, UN sanctions and a period of immense drought caused the economy to collapse. In 1979, the government realized its position was unmanageable and free elections were held. These led to the election of Robert Mugabe, and the independence of Rhodesia, now renamed Zimbabwe.

The years in which Robert Mugabe was prime minister and later president, would turn out to be the most devastating years for the country's welfare. Radical political changes and actions, such as the wars against the Shona and the redistribution of lands to the black people, caused Zimbabwean society to change forever.

³ The independence of South Rhodesia and its new name 'Rhodesia' were not recognized by the United Kingdom or other European countries.

Chapter 3 *The Grass is Singing*

The Grass is Singing is Doris Lessing's first novel. It was published in England in 1950, after she moved there in 1949. *The Grass is Singing* tells the story of Mary Turner, who, after spending most of her time in a small South Rhodesian city in relative comfort, decides it is time to marry. She marries Dick, a poor white farmer, and moves to the country. As Mary struggles with the household, their black servants, their poverty, and with being a good wife, she gradually changes from a relatively normal person into a mean and cruel boss. She slowly declines into a state of apathy and fear, feeling herself controlled by her black servant Moses, who ultimately kills her.

In this first novel, Lessing touches upon several topics that are interesting for the field of memory studies. The novel itself is written as a memory, for it begins with the murder and investigates the explanation of or motives for this murder. The famous opening paragraph of the novel already shows how cultural memories can be made and reinforced, because a small notification of the murder in the newspaper with the heading "Murder Mystery" is enough to confirm the ideas about black people that exist in white communities.

The newspaper did not say much. People all over the country must have glanced at the paragraph with its sensational heading and felt a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected. When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have. (*TGIS* 9)

Besides this creation and conservation of (white) cultural memories, Lessing investigates the idea of colonialism and white supremacy, and its effect on the white woman. Power relations between the black man and the white women are explored, as well as the taboo on sexual attraction between a black man and a white woman.

Before Mary moves to the countryside, she is used to a comfortable lifestyle in the city where she can make her own decisions. Living in a women's house, without servants of her own, she does not have to pay much attention to the way the whites deal with their black servants. Lessing comments on her good luck, "For she was living the comfortable carefree existence of a single woman in South Africa" without realizing her good fortune (*TGIS* 34). With no husband and no household to look after, Mary is free to do what she likes. This lifestyle, however, is only meant for young girls before they marry, and as Mary is getting older, society forces her to get married. Her decision to marry Dick Turner is therefore not her own, but forced on her by her friends and her background. It is because of her decision to marry however, that Mary is put in the position of the female white farmer.

Her inability to deal with the different servants she hires throughout the book is based on several factors. First of all, "(...) she was afraid of them, of course. Every woman in south Africa is brought up to be" (*TGIS* 59). Within the white settler community there was a cultural as well as an economical fear for the native South Rhodesians. The thought of white superiority, deeply embedded in the white communities of Africa, caused disdain and fear of other (black) cultures. To prevent racial mixture, women were taught to be afraid of black men. The economic fear, as explained in chapter two, is based on the idea of a growing black middle class, who, the whites feared, would be a threat to their economic welfare if they gained more rights.

Mary hides this fear by being unreasonably cruel and justifies her actions through her belief in the superiority of her own (white) culture. Her fear of her servants is however discovered by Moses. After all her former servants either ran away or were fired by Mary, her husband forces her to take on Moses, who until that time worked for Dick on his farm. What Dick does not know, however, is that Mary already met Moses when she had to take care of the farm during one of Dick's attacks of malaria. When taking over the farm for a few weeks,

Mary feels that Dick's labourers do not work as hard for her as they did for him. She ascribes this to her being a woman, and is furious with both pride and fear when she realizes the men will not obey her as they do Dick. Therefore she pushes them to work harder, brings a whip to the farming land while inspecting them, and does not allow them to take breaks. In a twisted paradox, the resentment of taking orders from a woman only grows when she treats them more cruelly, and when one of the workers finally disobeys her by getting up and asking for water, she acts on impulse and hits him across his face with her whip. Feeling immediately guilty of her cruelty, she looks up to the man's face and sees the hatred in his eyes. Frightened of him and of losing her position as their superior, she puts him back to work and refuses to let him drink. As Moses walks in after being sent to the house as her servant, she is confronted with the long scar the whip left on his face. Afraid of revenge, and of his physical capability of hurting her, she remains unreasonable, critical and mean toward him. She follows him around the house to make sure he obeys all her orders and is obsessed with the thought that he might do something to her so she watches him all the time.

However, as Mary becomes dependent upon Moses, this evokes a shift of position. When finally Moses, like other servants before her, has had enough, he tells her he wants to leave by the end of the month. But having made a promise to her husband to keep this servant, Mary involuntarily breaks out in tears and begs him to stay. Suddenly Moses realizes Mary is dependent upon him. Slowly but certainly his attitude toward her changes, as he knows she can now be forced to act kindly toward him. As he gains more power over her, boundaries fall away and Mary slowly begins to lose her mind.

There is another factor that is however not explicitly mentioned but silently understood by the reader and critics, which is Mary's supposed attraction to Moses (Roberts 77). Even though she fears him, his power over her and his culture in general, she is also infatuated by his physique.

She used to sit quite still, watching him work. The powerful, broad-built body fascinated her. She had given him white shorts and shirts to wear in the house, that had been used by her former servants. They were too small for him; as he swept or scrubbed or bent to the stove, his muscles bulged and filled out the thin material of the sleeves until it seemed they would split. (*TGIS* 142)

Mary's attraction to Moses is an important factor contributing to her mental illness. She hysterically tries to deny her attraction to him, resulting in cruelty. However, when cruelty no longer works because Moses has threatened to leave the house, Mary is left with feelings of fear, attraction and fear of that attraction which will eventually drive her mad.

In Mary's fear of Moses' culture and her attraction to him the cultural memory of the white South Rhodesian community becomes evident. Her belief system is based on a community in which the memory of England is still of importance, and so are the cultural practices that come with that memory. In Mary's childhood, "home" was not her house in Africa, but it meant England, where neither she nor her parents had actually ever been (*TGIS* 32). As the white community clung so fervently to the culture and systems of colonial England, they did not mix at all with the country's native inhabitants. As a group, the white community was therefore very isolated, and their cultural memories and practices did not change for decades. Black native South Rhodesians were not considered equal, because they did not share the same cultural practices, morals or values. Black native culture was considered as low and, as Doris Lessing explains in the beginning of the novel, myths and stories about the evilness of the natives would be spread around the white community to prevent racial mixture. For someone like Mary, it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to have seen the situation in any other way than how her cultural background had educated her.

For Tony Marston, the young Englishman who helps out on the Turners' farm, it is hard to understand that although he shares the same culture with the Turners and their neighbour Charlie Slatter, their cultural identities have grown apart. Although Marston also regards the white community as superior, he was educated in England, and has a far more liberal view on the situation of racial separation. Marston suspects that Mary is attracted to her houseboy, but tries to see things in perspective. Although he is appalled by his discovery that Mary lets her houseboy dress her, he imagines she may have been mentally ill, and he pities her for it. He does not understand Slatter's reaction when he sees Mary's dead body. "The hate and contempt that one would have expected to show on his face when he looked at the murderer, twisted his features now, as he stared at Mary" (*TGIS* 17). Where Marston pities her, Slatter despises her for her weakness. But then, Marston is new to the country, and has yet to learn of that "special fear" that Slatter has when he regards the situation. It is the fear, not of death, but of a shift in position. As all the power was in the hands of a small white minority in the late 1940's, Slatter fears the idea of a black man having so much influence on a white woman, because it affects his idea of white superiority.

This is where both cultural identities, of Marston and of Slatter, differ from each other because of their cultural memories. The history of England and South Rhodesia remains the same, but the interpretation of that history is influenced by the memories of both groups. We can also see this in the novel when Mary finds Marston's books. They are all about Rhodes and what he has done for the country. For Marston, South Rhodesia is still connected to Cecil Rhodes and the conquest of the South African lands in search of mineral wealth, but for Mary that part of history is not relevant any more. She has learned a little about him at school, but not that much (*TGIS* 199). The white community in South Rhodesia changed into a farming community, and with that change, a different cultural identity established itself. Although it

was still important to maintain certain cultural practices that set apart the white community from the (lower) black communities, the focus now shifted to the continuation of white power.

A second important issue that enhances Slatter's fear is Mary's implied sexual attraction to Moses. In a country that has a division between races, any sexual liaisons between white women and black men are taboo. Female sexual activity or interest was not openly spoken about, and any relations a white woman could have with a black man were unthinkable. To have an affair with or be attracted to a black man was something that could not be forgiven within this white society. Although Mary is white, she is still repressed by her gender, for if she were a man and had an affair with a black woman, the relationship would be so unequal that he would still have all the power. A white woman is of the superior race and colour, but a black man dominates her in gender, and thus the boundaries are less evident, and such a relationship is therefore considered to be more dangerous.

The Grass is Singing is therefore considered a feminist novel, because it examines the role of the white woman in a colonial society. Within such a society as South Rhodesia, the white man had all the power. Although the white woman was also part of the small elite group that ruled the country, she was at the same time repressed by her superior; the white man. In the city, unmarried women can work and live freely however, they are expected to marry at one point. After marriage however, a woman cannot work any longer and has to dedicate herself to her husband and family. In the country, women do not work at all, not even before they are married. It is very difficult for Mary to realize that she cannot help Dick with the farm, simply because the farmer's culture does not allow a woman to mingle with the farm business. These unwritten rules of the farmer's white culture are personified by Charlie Slatter. 'Niggers don't understand women giving them orders. They keep their own women in their right place' (*TGIS* 23). Because of this, Slatter explains that women 'have no idea how to deal with niggers' (*TGIS* 23). This, combined with the fact that women are closer in

rank to the black man, could make it possible, although unspeakable, for a white woman to be involved with a black man.

Because of the rarity of the discussion of sexual repression in a colonial setting and of the sexual attractiveness of a black man, *The Grass Is Singing* can also be considered as a counter history. The idea of a counter history, or a counter memory, is that it challenges the dominant discourse (Olick 126). In the 50's, when South Rhodesia was still a part of the British Empire, such stories would not be considered to capture the white colonial culture. The role of the white woman and her repressed sexuality is what makes *The Grass is Singing* a counter history. Lessing's novel is a realistic novel in its historical setting, but gives another view on what so far had been written about white settler culture in South Rhodesia.

In *The Grass is Singing*, it is obvious that Lessing criticizes colonization and the horrible effect it has on a country and its original inhabitants. However, in her novel, she did not create a character that is totally despicable, she tries to grasp the person behind the atrocities of her actions. Mary Turner as a character represents more than one of the people that upheld a system of racial separation, she also represents the repressed woman in a colonial society (Hanley 3). She was perfectly happy as a single woman in the city, but due to her cultural background she feels forced to marry. Lessing does not imply that Mary was an innocent bystander in the case of racial separation during her life in the city. She describes Mary's comfortable life which is evidently made possible by the institution of racial separation. However, only after Mary moves to the farm does she come into touch with natives and become an active participant in the system, where she both loses the authority over herself, but wins the authority over her servants (Hanley 4).

This duality forms the core of Lessing's counter history. Together with condemning racial separation, she also condemns the way women were treated. As mentioned before, in the chapter explaining about cultural memory studies, in a cultural memory people have the

tendency to divide past events into either a form of greatness or a form of evil. As apartheid and racial separation are now considered to belong to the latter category, all people involved with those systems must therefore be considered evil. Lessing however shows that even when a person belonged to this group, they can still suffer from repression. Mary Turner is judged by her own cultural group because of her gender and her sexuality, and her failure to live up to the role that is expected from her as a woman. The counter history that Lessing created is the critical approach to the cultural memory that Ricoeur speaks of.

In the case of cultural remembrance, *The Grass is Singing* also provides a basis for discussion. Discussing the duality of the white female, who is both in charge and repressed, gives another view on how they can be or should be remembered. Besides that, the novel also comments upon the remembrance of the native worker. Although the novel does not focus on Moses specifically, since most of the story is seen through the eyes of Mary Turner, there are still some interesting parts in the novel that give room for discussion. Wang (2009) discusses the reviews that came out following the publication of the book and finds that many of them ask the question whether it was necessary for Moses to kill Mary (Wang 1). As Mary is the “evil” in the novel, her victim, Moses, cannot be a murderer as well.

The murder is however important for the book. First of all, it shows that when a black man has murdered a white woman, he will be judged before he can explain himself. Although Marston may have the innocent belief that Moses will get a fair trial, Lessing does not try to hide that this will not be the case. Paradoxically, the white community is again exposed for its unfairness, instead of the murderer. Secondly, the article in the newspaper suggests that for the white community, it would have been better if Mary had been murdered for her money, even if that is one of their fears. The truth that a white woman might have been involved with a black man and has been killed because of her racist attitude, would affect their cultural memory of the black and of their own culture. The rising power of the black man was the

greatest fear of all, and to remember Mary as an innocent victim of a robbery by a black man would be easier and safer and does not threaten the cultural memory. When the sergeant thinks about how to explain the murder, he has to think of a way in which to hide the fact that Mary may have been more than just an innocent victim. ‘The one fact that remained still to be dealt with was the necessity for preserving appearances. (...) it was part of his job (...) was rather implicit in the spirit of the country, the spirit in which he was soaked’ (*TGIS* 25) Again, Lessing shows that a cultural background is defining the way in which a person acts. Thirdly, it shows how little the white community knows about the black native culture. The last paragraph of the novel describes Moses waiting for the police to come and arrest him. “‘Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say” (*TGIS* 206).

Wang also argues that *The Grass is Singing* is an example of the expression of postcolonial guilt. In her novel however, Lessing seems to combine both an expression of guilt and the idea that, especially for a woman, it would have been nearly impossible to escape a cultural background in which white superiority was so firmly established. At the end of the novel, Mary can feel her death coming:

For the evil was a thing that she could feel: had she not lived with it for many years?
 But what had she done? (...) Nothing of her own volition. Step by step, she had come to this, a woman without will (...) waiting for the night to come that would finish her.
 And justly – she knew that. But why? Against what had she sinned? The conflict between her judgment on herself, and her feeling of innocence, of having been propelled by something she did not understand, cracked the wholeness of her vision.
 (*TGIS* 195)

In this paragraph Lessing describes the faint feeling of guilt that Mary feels for the way she has treated Moses and her other black servants. At the same time however, she can neither pinpoint what exactly she should be feeling guilty about, nor why she should be punished. In her mind she was forced into marriage, forced into living on a farm and forced to behave the way she did. She cannot imagine any other way she could have acted. Her cultural background, with its own cultural identity and cultural memories, decided her path for her, from which she could not have escaped.

Chapter 4 *Alfred and Emily*

In this second chapter, Doris Lessing's novel *Alfred and Emily* will be analyzed in the light of cultural memory studies. In this novel, Lessing describes the lives of her parents in two different parts. It was published in 2008, after both her parents had died. The first part of the book is the story of her father Alfred and her mother Emily as Lessing imagined it would have been had there not been two World Wars. The second part of the novel is Lessing's memoirs, where she tries, through her own memories, to describe her parents as they were and explain why she chose to give them "new pasts".

Although the novel, besides being autobiographic, also has fictional elements, both parts of the novel are important for the analysis. It is the combination of the imaginary and the memory that provides the important themes for the novel. In *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing plays with the idea that the imaginary and memory can overlap, as memory is in some ways also subject to imagination. It is at this point, when memories cannot distinguish between the real and the imagined, that history is used as a framework against which those memories can be tested. In an alternative history, such as the first part of the novel, history is changed to fit the (imagined) memories, providing the reader, and in this case also the writer, with a happier image of the past, while keeping in mind that this alternative history is, both in memory and historical facts, fictional.

Alfred and Emily is also a novel about history and how history is remembered. The First and Second World Wars play an important role in Lessing's memory of both her parents and her upbringing. Besides that, the novel focuses on her memory of South Rhodesia and thus provides insight in the way the white middle class lived in a colony. In addition to this, the novel shows how personal memories can be used to analyze the situation the object of the memory was in at that time. This becomes clear in the analysis of her mother's character and will be discussed throughout this chapter.

All themes are emphasized by Lessing's choice to create an imaginary life for both her parents. Had there been no war, no South Rhodesia and no illness, her father and mother might never have married, would never have had children together, and could have lived the happier lives she gives them in the first half of her novel. This fictional life Lessing created for her parents, however, is based on memories Lessing had of her parents. As she explains at the end of the fictional story about Alfred and Emily: "I have relied not only on traits of character that may be extrapolated, or extended, but on tones of voice, sighs, wistful looks, signs as slight as those used by skilful trackers" (*Alfred and Emily* 139). She has used her memories of their expression of emotions and combined it with the stories they told her as a young girl about England. The characters in the fictional half are therefore mostly based on stories about people Alfred and Emily knew in their youth. Although the story is fictional, Lessing has tried to remain as close as possible to their characters in order to create a story that really could have been and is not only a fantasy about a better life and better remembrance of her parents. It is an alternative history that is based on memory, and can therefore contribute to the analysis of cultural memory studies in Lessing's work.

The World Wars and their Influence

It is not merely a coincidence that Lessing chooses to leave out the First and Second World Wars in her creation of a fictional life for her parents. The decision to leave out the wars, and especially the Great War, has enabled Lessing to imagine an England in which both Emily and Alfred would have led happier lives. Besides that, Lessing herself was formed as a child because of both World Wars, the First through the memories of her father and the Second through her own memories. The reason to create an alternative history, is to "force ourselves into the effort of imagination necessary to realize our full humanity and to disinherit our legacy of violence" (Schneider 260). The alteration of memories and history asks for an

analysis of both, which provides a critical framework of those memories and history. With such a framework, it is easier to recognize the faults that have been made in history and the effects those faults have on cultural identity and memory.

In real life, Alfred was wounded in the Great War, and met his wife Emily when she was nursing him in a hospital in London. Alfred's physical injury which resulted in the loss of his leg, combined with his mental injury caused by the horrors of the trenches, had an enormous impact on his life. As Lessing remembers him, she mentions his need to talk about the atrocities of the Great War, the friends he had lost, his illness and his general depression that was a result of the war: "And now, looking back at life, it is evident to me that my father, during the dreadful slow end of it, was depressed" (*Alfred and Emily* 154).

In the imagined life of her father, Alfred was not wounded because he did not have to go to war. He was happily married and led a long and prosperous life. There are two reasons why Lessing chooses to provide her father with a happier life without the horrors of the war. First of all, it is for himself. She describes the awful mark the war left on him, both physically and mentally. In her memories of him, she realizes that her father must have led a mostly unhappy life, and to provide him with an alternative, happier life, Lessing recreates her memory of him, so as to help him be remembered as a man who has lived a fulfilling life. The second reason she leaves out the Great War is for herself and her memory of her childhood. Her upbringing was shaped for the greater part by the memories of her parent's experiences with the war.

(...) through my childhood (...) it felt as if the black cloud he talked about was there, pressing down on me. I remember crouching in the bush, my hands tight over my ears:
 'I won't, I will not. Stop. I will not listen.' (*Alfred and Emily* 170)

To think about her parents without them having been through the horrors of the war, would have made her childhood memories free of the "black cloud" that was always present during

her upbringing. In giving her parents a better life, her own memories are freed from the darkness of the Great War.

She also does this for her mother. However, in the creation of Emily's fictional life, there are still some rather unhappy moments. Lessing explains that the memories of her mother are harder to alter, because Lessing is much more shaped by her mother's faults of character than her father's. As Lessing remembers her mother, she finds it hard to see in her the characteristics of the socialite she describes her to be in the fictional part, because none of these characteristics were left in her own memory of her mother. Here, she had to rely solely on stories her father and her mother told her of England and London before they were married. The fictional Emily is based on these stories and not on Lessing's memories because the woman that was her mother in real life did not have much in common with that imagined figure.

Nothing that she ever told, or was said about her, or one could deduce of her in that amazing girlhood, so busy, so full of achievement, or of her nursing years, about which we had the best of witnesses, my father himself, or the years in Persia, so enjoyable and social, nothing, anywhere, in all this matches up with what my mother became. (*Alfred and Emily* 156)

As Lessing describes her mother as she was in real life, she realizes that the war also left an imprint on her mother because of her mother's job as a nurse and her role as the wife of a traumatized husband. Although she admits that as a child and young adult she could not see how the war could have changed her mother into the rather cold and needy person that she was, Lessing analyzes her memories of her mother in the novel to realize she might have been another, and above all, kinder, person had she not lived through the war. Her time as a nurse in the hospital, her memories of the dying soldiers and the caring for her traumatized father, changed Emily into the person that she was in Lessing's memory.

The decision to leave out the Second World War is not so much based on the difference it would have made to her father's life, but to the lives of her mother, her brother and herself. Although her brother does not play a role in the fictional story, for he would not have been born, in her memories of him she describes the effect of the Second World War on his character. She describes a conversation with him after many years of hardly any contact between them, and he tells her that he has lived his life in the shadow of the war in which he was a soldier, and was never truly himself because of this.

For Lessing, the Second World War has shaped a period of time in her past that she remembers as the worst time in her life. At that time, Lessing was married to her first husband and still lived in Rhodesia.

So everyone, but everyone, was thinking, as we went through the war, the enormities of it, the weight of it, the horror of it, the grotesque nastiness of it all, This can't be happening, it can't... (*Alfred and Emily* 273)

Especially after the end of the war, when horror stories reached South Rhodesia through the RAF members that were stationed there, waiting to return to England, Lessing found herself waiting for her real life to begin. 'Those years before we all left Rhodesia, as ships became available, no, they were not a good time' (*Alfred and Emily* 272). However, this did not only have to do with the sadness of the soldiers and the stories about the Holocaust that soon reached them via the news. It had to do with her mother, who lived close by and tried to run Lessing's life for her. It is this particular part of her life that Lessing tries to forget by creating a new memory, without that war, of her parents and especially her mother as a good and kind person.

The trauma of the Great War shaped both Alfred and Emily. For Lessing, creating an alternative history is to analyze her memories, and to give them a new place in her life. Remembering her parents without the traumas that shaped them and their children, provides a

happier picture and a happier memory of her parents. It is a personal development for Lessing to provide insight into her father's, but more prominently her mother's, real character. She reshapes the memory of her parents so she can remember them as good people, which they were in essence, had those wars not taken place.

The Memory of South Rhodesia

Although South Rhodesia is never mentioned in the fictional story about Alfred and Emily because they both stay in England, the former English colony is of great importance to Lessing's childhood. The reason she leaves South Rhodesia out of the fictional story is because her parents' lives in South Rhodesia, and especially her mother's life, were a great part of their development in character. For her mother, South Rhodesia was not a happy period in her life. She expected to be part of a middle-class culture, much like she had experienced in her years in Persia, and was shocked by the fact that the farming community did not match her expectations. Her sadness about the life she had wanted to live and lost by moving to a farm in the bush of South Rhodesia is represented by the box of beautiful dresses she keeps in her bedroom. Lessing, as a young girl, is intrigued by this box full of memories of a past life. As she takes the dresses out of the box, her mother becomes emotional:

‘I’m being very silly,’ she announced, and swept herself up to her feet. ‘You’d better have these,’ she said. ‘You can use them for dressing up. Or cut them up, if you feel like... I don’t care...’ and she ran out of the room to find a place to cry, I suppose.

(Alfred and Emily 204)

In this paragraph Lessing shows that her mother, when moving to South Rhodesia, lost the life that she was used to, like many middle class settlers might have experienced when moving to South Rhodesia.

A parallel here can be made to Mary in *The Grass is Singing*. Although Mary, unlike Emily, is born in South Rhodesia, she also leaves her life of comfort behind to live on a farm. Both women try to hold on to the English way of living, and both women are unhappy with the life they have chosen.

Another element that can be found in both *Alfred and Emily* and *The Grass Is Singing* is feminism. In her first novel, the element of feminism is rather prominent, as it investigates the role of the white woman in a colonial society. In *Alfred and Emily*, the element of feminism is less outspoken, but in her description of her mother it is still there. In the fictional story of Alfred and Emily, she has given her mother an important job, and created a successful woman. Lessing acknowledges here, as she did in *The Grass Is Singing*, that South Rhodesia was not a place for a woman to develop herself and that her mother also suffered from the white colonial rules.

The way Alfred and Emily cling to their old way of living is exemplary for the way the English settlers tried to live their lives. In the first and second chapter the phenomenon is explained that caused English culture and South Rhodesian settler culture to change separately from each other. Upon moving to South Rhodesia, both Alfred and Emily try to keep up the English traditions and rituals. Alfred used to love horse riding in England and consequently tries to do this in South Rhodesia as well. However, horses are not practical to ride on in South Rhodesia due to the soil, so instead, trying to keep up traditions, he rides a donkey. The same need for English standards can be seen in Emily, when she tries to decorate the house in English style. However, real English furniture cannot be bought in South Rhodesia, so instead bookcases, tables and dressers are made out of painted boxes.

Another important issue that Emily holds on to is her love for (children's) literature. Many books were ordered from England, and it is this period of time in Lessing's childhood that she remembers as one of the happiest. In her description of the novels she is provided

with, there is already an example of the South Rhodesian culture deviating from traditional English culture. It is a difference in the way English, or Western, society would describe black people in literature. As English children would not have seen many black people, they assumed the picture painted for them by children's writers is correct. However, Lessing, who has been living amongst black people all her life, cannot see any resemblance and it takes her a long time to understand what the English author meant.

In *Little Black Sambo* the hero did not resemble in any way the black people I was surrounded by, not in face, or in how he spoke or dressed, I was an adult before I understood that the golliwog-like creature was meant to be human. Caricature should not be too far from its subject. (*Alfred and Emily* 168)

Besides the furniture, riding and books, Emily also tries to share some of her English "wisdom" with their black neighbours. As a nurse, Emily helps people in the neighbourhood by treating them with medicine or telling them how to avoid diseases. She tries to explain the importance of caring for the body to their black labourers, and hopelessly fails in her effort to do so.

Although Lessing was a supporter of the black opposition in South Rhodesia and was in favour of creating an independent country where all civilians had equal rights (Watkins 244), she does not dwell upon the faults of the political system of her childhood. She describes the country of her youth in a rather factual manner and focuses only on what the situation meant for her and her family.

Through the story of her parents she paints a picture of the situation of English settlers, their troubles adjusting to the country and the reason for those difficulties. She describes the memories of her childhood in South Rhodesia without including the political history because at that time she was not aware that such politics could have been wrong. At the end of the novel, when Lessing describes going back to South Rhodesia in the 1980's, she can place her

memories in a historical and political framework, feeding into the cultural memories of a lost colonial lifestyle. Here, Lessing expresses a careful form of nostalgia.

Although she does not long back for the colonial period, with which rules and regulations she never agreed, she does reflect upon the fact that since Mugabe became the leader of the country conditions have worsened. When visiting the house, she is confronted with the poverty of the children now living there, and upon seeing their faces a hint of nostalgia for the “lost” country overwhelms her.

Long ago, in 1956, I was in Cold Comfort Farm, a ‘progressive’ farm that gave education to children and adolescents before the black government came. There I met an idealistic young man (...) who said he wanted to be educated as to help his people, ‘to give my life for my people’. (...) That idealistic youngster soon became Didymus Mutasa, a bosom crony of Mugabe. (...) Not long ago he said it wouldn’t matter if so many people died of Aids or of anything else. ‘We would be better off with two million people less,’ said this man who has become one of the most corrupt, most unscrupulous black leaders in Africa. (*Alfred and Emily* 231)

It is not a form of nostalgia that yearns for the recreation of white-ruled South Rhodesia, but she does imply that before the black government took over, conditions were better for both black and white people. It might be morally questionable, as Walder argues, to experience feelings of nostalgia for a period which is marked by colonialism, but given the historic facts, Lessing is right in her saying that conditions worsened since Mugabe seized power. The nostalgia that is displayed here, is not of a personal kind, but part of a cultural memory, which has almost disappeared since the whites left the colony.

Although *Alfred and Emily* was written 58 years after her first novel *The Grass Is Singing*, there are still elements in her writing and her adding to cultural memory that correspond with her first novel. As in *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing tries to explain the

cultural environment the white settlers lived in. Although she does not in any way try to find an excuse for the political history of South Rhodesia, she does try to find an explanation for it in the cultural differences between living in England and in South Rhodesia.

In conclusion, *Alfred and Emily* is a novel in which Doris Lessing touches upon several topics she has discussed before in her fiction, such as white superiority and the role of women in a colonial society. In creating an alternative history and placing it next to the “real” history of her parents, Lessing shows what the effects of historical events are on the personal lives of people. Besides that, she shows how people are formed by the society they live in, and how cultural memories in such a society are created and maintained. The differences with reality, in which white parents pass on colonial cultural memories about the dangers of the black people to their children, are enormous, and with that Lessing shows how much influence a society and its cultural memories can have on an individual. She uses her personal memories to create a story, and with that story shows how white colonial communities have created their own culture and their own cultural memories.

Chapter 5 *Martha Quest*

The third novel that will be analyzed using the theory of cultural memory studies, is Doris Lessing's second novel *Martha Quest*. This novel is the first of her *Children of Violence* series, which includes five novels, all about the same main character; Martha Quest. In *Martha Quest*, which was published in 1952, Doris Lessing describes the teenage and young adult life of Martha. *Martha Quest* can be seen as a 'coming of age novel', or a 'Bildungsroman' because in this first novel about Martha, Lessing focuses on Martha's development as a teenager up to her marriage with Douglas (Kaplan 537).

After having read the story and analysis of *Alfred and Emily*, it will be clear that Martha Quest is a character which is based on Doris Lessing herself (Peel 2). In *Alfred and Emily*, it becomes clear that Lessing has trouble with her mother, and that her father is a silent and tortured man, very much affected by the horrors of the Great War. Martha Quest deals with the same problems as Lessing did during her childhood, and also marries a man she does not love, like Lessing herself. Although there are many similarities between Lessing and her main character, *Martha Quest* is not recognized as an autobiography. Although the first three novels of the *Children of Violence* series contain many autobiographical elements, the last novel does not, and so Martha Quest is proven a fictional character in the end (Peel 4). In this chapter, however, I will discuss only *Martha Quest*, and show that the autobiographical elements, like in *Alfred and Emily* contribute to the expression of cultural memory in the novel.

Like *Alfred and Emily* and *The Grass Is Singing*, *Martha Quest* focuses on the issues of race, colonialism and the two world wars, and discusses the idea of female emancipation and feminism. As Kaplan mentions, Martha Quest is not the average character in a Bildungsroman because the novel does not only focus on her development but on the development of the country and the world as well. In this chapter, I will both look at Martha's

development as a teenager in a society that is formed by strict rules and ideas about cultural values and to what extent Doris Lessing describes the general circumstances of the country Martha lives in. For Martha, it is the cultural memory of the group of people she belongs to that she starts to resist, as a teenager who does not want to do as she is told, but also because of her individuality and because of her own ideas of cultural values.

In the first chapter of *Martha Quest*, Lessing shows that Martha's parents are part of a group that share cultural memories. As Lessing showed in *Alfred and Emily*, both parents still cling to the cultural values that are part of British culture, but have learned after living in South Rhodesia for a few years, that some of their cultural habits will eventually disappear.

When Mrs Quest first arrived, she was laughed at, because of the piano and the expensive rugs, because of her clothes, because she had left visiting cards on her neighbours. She laughed herself now, ruefully, remembering her mistakes. (*Martha Quest*, 19)

However, as both Martha's father, who is incidentally also called Alfred, and her mother both still feel they are British and belong to that society more than they do to the South Rhodesian settler society, in their conversations their cultural inheritance is still visible. This becomes clear in the Quests' relationship with their, originally Afrikaner, neighbours. Mrs van Rensberg and Mrs Quest come together regularly to discuss, or rather gossip about, the people they know. However, there is still a cultural difference between both families because their cultural background differs. Mrs Quest, although friends with Mrs van Rensberg, still regards her neighbours as a socially lower class, whereas Mrs van Rensberg still sees the Quests as rather uptight British socialites. However, within such a small community as the little villages in South Rhodesia, the white settlers had only each other to talk to. In a white settler society, class differences do not matter anymore, but the Quests, and especially Mrs Quest, has trouble accepting Mrs van Rensberg as socially equal. They can agree on ways to treat a native or rule

a farm, however, the Quests still regard themselves as British and treat the van Rensbergs as poorer and socially lower Afrikaners.

Martha despises her mother because of her behaviour towards Mrs van Rensberg, which is sometimes condescending and hypocritical, for she does not really respect her. However, Martha also despises the van Rensbergs, because of their gossiping and their racist attitude towards the natives. Martha is on the one hand a typical teenage girl, who dislikes her parents and promises herself never to become like them. She likes to annoy her parents by not agreeing with them and starting a discussion about everything. However, these aspects of puberty, which are common for many teenagers, are based on problems which are present on a broader social level as well. With the character of Martha, Lessing shows the struggle of the whites born in South Rhodesia, who are bound to the social and cultural heritage of England by their upbringing, but are not entirely part of that particular culture because of the country they were born in. “Now, it is quite easy to remark the absurdities and contradictions of a country’s social system from outside its borders, but very difficult if one has been brought up in it (...)” (*Martha Quest* 57).

As Lessing shows in *The Grass is Singing*, the cultural memory of the white settlers is very much kept alive by their living in such a small community. The prejudices against the natives, which were born both out of fear for the unknown and economical fear, are enforced by the local newspapers. In *The Grass Is Singing*, Mary Turner is told as a little girl to be afraid of the natives, and so is Martha Quest. However, as a rebelling teenager, Martha feels obliged to disagree with her parents, and finds herself become more liberal about the “issue of the natives”.

‘My dear, read the newspapers, white girls are always being ra- attacked.’ Now,

Martha could not remember any case of this happening; it was one of the things people

said. She remarked: ‘Last week a white man raped a black girl, and was fined five pounds.’ (*Martha Quest* 50)

However, from the beginning of the novel it is not clear whether Martha really feels that all cultures, including black cultures, should be treated as equal, or that this statement is just another way to annoy her parents. Martha is however fond of reading, and as her Jewish neighbours, Joss and Solly, provide her with books about all kinds of topics she does see a chance to develop herself and form opinions that are truly her own. When her parents argue with the van Rensbergs and the friendship between them is over, Martha does not care for she did not like them. However, as she then meets the van Rensberg in the little village and realizes that she considers herself to be “better”, she starts thinking.

Martha was remembering with shame the brash and easy way she had said to Joss that she repudiated race prejudice; for the fact was, she could not remember a time when she had not thought of people in terms of groups, nations or colour of skin first, and as people afterwards. (*Martha Quest* 61)

After this episode, Martha seems to have realized she is formed by her cultural background as well. She vows however to be conscious of it, and never treat another human being as unequal. She starts to read about socialism, and takes a great interest in its ideas. As Martha starts a job in the city and moves out of her parents’ house, she starts out as an ambitious and idealistic young girl planning to join the socialists. However, the city and all its pleasures are too big a temptation and Martha becomes part of the city’s young carefree crowd, and she does not go to the socialist meetings anymore.

The middle part of the novel described Martha’s time in the city as a young and carefree girl, which is comparable to Mary’s life before she married Dick in *The Grass is Singing*. However, in *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing merely reflects upon the comparison between city life and country life in South Rhodesia, whereas in *Martha Quest*

Lessing also makes comparison between the city life in South Rhodesia and city life in Great Britain. In the character of Donovan Anderson the difference in culture and social class between the upper classes of South Rhodesia and Great Britain becomes clear. He is eager to go to London and leave South Rhodesia, because even though there is an elite group in South Rhodesia, it is a settler culture that has formed different, and to his mind lower, cultural habits and living standards. The sports club where all the young people hang out is established for all people, and claims to treat everyone as equal, where social status does not matter. However, it is not social status but money which has become important, because all members still have to pay a fee. Besides that, the black community is excluded from the club, they are only present at the club as waiters. Again, this is comparable to Mary in *The Grass is Singing*, for the city seems like a perfect and carefree world, but only to the unmarried, white and rich South Rhodesians.

It is also in this part of the novel that Lessing puts her own memories of the city, and describes them in a nostalgic way: “it was like a fairy story, drenched in nostalgic golden light, where everyone is young, nothing changes” (*Martha Quest* 180). This vision of the days before the Second World War is very romantic, happy and sounds like the perfect time. But, as Walder notes: “nostalgia often invokes utopia” (Walder 102), claiming that this form of memory is not related to the real memory or to history. A few chapters later, Lessing reveals the meaning of her use of nostalgia for this particular period of time. As Martha witnesses the brutal handling of twenty black people arrested by the police for being out after curfew, she is immediately affected by a strong sense of anger and guilt. However, as she cannot see how she can make a difference on her own, Martha drowns herself again in pleasure-seeking and denies the fact that there are real problems in South Rhodesia. She deliberately tries to create a utopian life and lifestyle in order not to have to worry about the facts.

And what now? demanded that sarcastic voice inside Martha; and it answered itself, Go out and join the Prisoner's Aid Society.(...)These highly coloured fantasies of heroism and fated death were so powerful she could only with a great effort close her mind to them. But shut them out she did. (...) 'I'm going out again tonight,' she said, and spoke as if she could hardly wait for that night to begin. (*Martha Quest* 215-217)

Lessing uses nostalgia here to explain the world Martha creates for herself in order to escape the true South Rhodesian life. The nostalgic feelings that Mary has are fake, they are constructed in order for her to escape the real world.

There is another meaning to the use of Lessing's nostalgia, which is a less personal form of nostalgia. The nostalgia concerning the British sports club and its British members, and the "golden light" that Lessing speaks about is a reference to anxieties of losing the English culture, which were always present in South Rhodesia and came up in Great Britain after the wars (Bazin 117). Therefore, the nostalgic tone is used as criticism of the British white settler community in the city, who claimed to be open-minded and carefree, but in reality clung together in order not to lose their cultural identities. As Walder explains: "Lessing's writing invites us to contemplate both the narrow and the broader perspectives invoked by her memories" (Walder 112).

In both cases, nostalgia as a stylistic feature to describe Martha's unwillingness to face facts and nostalgia as a reference to existing anxieties about the decline of the British culture, Lessing uses nostalgia as criticism on the cultural memory of the British South Rhodesians. In contrast to the slight hint of nostalgia in *Alfred and Emily* which was discussed in the fourth chapter, Lessing is not herself nostalgic. She shows how nostalgia can be a construction of a cultural memory that is in fact fake, and bears little relation to the actual facts. She uses her own memories to create a fictional story in which she can point out the construction of cultural memories of a specific group.

Besides the use of nostalgia, which Lessing uses as a very important factor criticizing the creation of cultural memories, *Martha Quest* is also an example of Doris Lessing's feminist writings. However, like *The Grass Is Singing*, this feminism is again connected to the issue of colonialism and the customs of colonial society. Martha likes to work, but as she notices her friends are getting married, Martha feels compelled to marry as well. Her father and mother regard her marriage with relief and happiness, for a single daughter working and living alone in the city can only be accepted for a few years.

Mrs Quest stood shaking Mr Maynard by the hand, her face lit by the timid charming smile which was so strange in contrast with the formidable masculine face, while Mr Maynard smiled his usual tolerant comment on life and people. 'Mr Maynard, you must agree with me, it's *such* a relief when you get your daughter properly married!' And Mr Maynard replied, 'Unfortunately I have no daughter, but if I had, it would be my first concern.' (*Martha Quest* 319)

In the following novels of the *Children of Violence* series, the idea of feminism connected to white colonial culture and the cultural memories that this group share, is further explored.

Martha Quest, in conclusion, is a novel about the creation of cultural memories, and how such a creation can be constructed in stead of genuinely remembered. Doris Lessing shows this through the use of nostalgia, explaining that it is a way of hiding from the truth as well as openly denying problems. Besides that, Lessing shows that even a strong, self-sufficient character like Martha is formed by these cultural memories, explaining the difficulty of breaking free from one's own culture.

Conclusion

From the beginning of her writing, Doris Lessing's work has been considered to be feminist writing. It is certainly so that in her novels Lessing's female characters are important factors to represent criticism on the present situation of women. Especially in Lessing's first novels, the role of women in a colonial society is investigated and criticized. We see this form of feminism in *The Grass is Singing* where Mary has to conform to the rules of the white colonial farmers, and thus loses her right to work and develop herself. We see the same in *Martha Quest* who lives a rather carefree life in the city, but decides to marry to please her family and friends, because that is the custom. In *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing looks back at her mother, and while searching through her memory, realizes that her mother was also held back by her marriage because she had to give up her job and instead take care of her husband. In all three novels feminism and the development of women, or rather, their struggle for development, is evident.

However, Lessing does not exclusively write about feminism or about the role of women. She also discusses the issues of race and racism, the role of the white society in a colony and the differences between several cultures within this society. All of these topics combined create an image of the white society in colonial South Rhodesia.

By using the theory of cultural memory studies, it becomes clear that Lessing's work creates a picture of the cultural identity and the cultural memory of the white (British) settlers in South Rhodesia. Besides that, Doris Lessing, with her fiction, adds to (western) cultural memory herself. In *The Grass is Singing* Lessing tries to explain the situation from the white settlers' point of view, paying special attention to the women in this society. Lessing does not try to lessen the actions which the colonial settlers are responsible for, but she does try to make room for discussion as she proposes that within such a society women like Mary, and to

some extent her mother in *Alfred and Emily*, were also, albeit in a different way, victims of the white settler and male orientated culture.

Alfred and Emily however, is not a counter-history, but an alternative history. With the alteration of her memories, Lessing shows the effects that (constructed) cultural memories can have on a group and an individual, like for instance her mother. The differences between the fictional and the “real” Emily are enormous only because the group in which she lives and the man she is married to differs, thus showing the considerable effect of such a social and cultural change on a personal level.

In *Martha Quest*, Lessing uses another stylistic form that is connected to cultural memory and memory studies in general; nostalgia. In *Alfred and Emily*, it already appears when Lessing describes her visit of the farm she once lived in with her parents, and realizes that now that the colony has disappeared the situation has not improved. In this case, Lessing criticizes the present by referring to the past as a better time, although in the rest of the novel she is clear on the fact that she does not agree with the idea of colonization. In *Martha Quest*, nostalgia is also used to criticize the present situation, because she ridicules the feeling of anxiety living among the British that their culture will soon disappear. Nostalgic references to the ‘good old times’ when the sports club with all its British members was still flourishing are in fact ironic, because it is obvious that even at that time problems of all sorts were rising in the colonies and the whole period was not as beautiful as Lessing describes.

In all three novels, Lessing uses her own personal memories to create fiction that fits into a bigger cultural memory. *Alfred and Emily*, however, is not entirely fiction, because half of the novel is Lessing’s own memoirs. With these memories Lessing creates an image of her parents that fits into the cultural memory of the white British settlers, and thus shows how such a group formed their identity.

In her work, Lessing uses her memories of her parents, her neighbours, the farming communities and the people living in the cities of South Rhodesia to create an image of the cultural identity of a colonial society and with that adds to cultural memory and the understanding of that particular cultural memory.

The analyses of Lessing's novels have provided an overview of different aspects of cultural memory studies, such as alternative history, counter-history and nostalgia. In combination with the historical background found in the second chapter, I have given an analysis that is based on memory, fiction and history, and thus follows the idea of cultural memory studies. As cultural memory studies are still developing, it is necessary that more research will be done in the future. Especially concerning colonial and post-colonial writing, I find that not all voices are always heard. There is a tendency to divide groups into either perpetrators or victims, making them either bad or good. However, as Lessing shows in her fiction, this cannot always be the case. There is no reason for denying atrocities of the past, nevertheless, we should also consider that within the group of perpetrators victims might be found as well. This becomes clear when Lessing talks about the role of women in white settler societies. In future research in literature, history or any other area that is interested in cultural dynamics, it should be noted that history and memory are intertwined and cannot be separated.

In literature, as well as in politics, cultural memory should be considered as a guideline, helped by a framework of historical facts. In this way, multiple histories and memories can live next to and intertwine with each other in order to create societies and groups that respect each others cultural memories.

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