Sites of Personal and Cultural Memories in Doris Lessing’s Writings of Africa

Elena Anca Georgescu
Valahia University of Targoviste, Romania

Abstract: This paper aims to map sites of personal and cultural memories and the way they are interwoven in some of Doris Lessing’s writings of Africa from the perspective of Cultural Memory Studies. The concepts of ‘home’, ‘memory’ and ‘re-memory’, as well as ‘nostalgia’ will be analyzed in *Going Home*, one of the accounts of the author’s return to Africa, in order to demonstrate that cultural memory and memory in general are indicative of the shaping of Lessing as a writer with multiple identities. The study will also focus on the novel *Alfred and Emily*, where Doris Lessing uses another aspect that is part of cultural memory studies, which is the creation of an alternative history and story of her parents and post-war England. The main argument here is that Lessing blends factual and fictional writing in her most recent half fiction, half memoir to construct alternative personal and cultural ‘hi(-)stories’. This viewpoint – that a human individual is always intertwined with other individuals and further with history – is an undercurrent that permeates Lessing’s writings. The analysis demonstrates that in the novels under scrutiny, and not only these, Lessing has used her own personal memories to create fiction that fits into a bigger frame, that of cultural memory studies.

Keywords: Memory, home, nostalgia, identity, fact, fiction, Africa, England, war.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the interest in the field of cultural memory studies has drastically expanded and the relationship between culture and memory has emerged as a key issue of interdisciplinary research. The domain of cultural memory studies is not, and will probably never be ‘a coherent and unified field of enquiry’, as it is practiced in different disciplines (Cubitt, 2007: 2). It is therefore difficult to provide a theoretical framework that will include all aspects of memory studies, as it involves fields as diverse as history, sociology, art, literary and media studies, philosophy or psychology. 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 *Going Home* and *Alfred and Emily*.

While in neurology, memory is approached as a concept that is formed by the workings of our brain, involving 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 *History and Memory*, Cubitt speaks about memory and its relation to history. Memory is the survival as well as the reconstruction of past experiences, both individual and shared, it can be linked to culture, religion or social institutions (Cubitt, 2007: 2). Similarly, in Paul Ricoeur’s view, 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 (Ricoeur, 2004: 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.

Collective memory, which means ‘the active past that forms our identities’ (Olick, 1998: 111), is used interchangeably with cultural memory in the field of memory studies and it can include official memory, family memory and vernacular memory.

In her fiction, Doris Lessing uses her own personal memories to create fiction that fits into the frame of cultural memory studies. She connects history and memory, by making sure that her memory is put in a critical, historical context, that of British colonial history.

Colonialism, racism and two World wars, including the Holocaust, were a turning point for the understanding of cultural memory (Olick, 1998: 119). In Europe, the realization grew that a cultural memory ‘does not merely reflect past experiences (...) [but] it has an orientation function’ (Olick, 124). This conscious approach to a cultural memory is what Ricoeur meant when he said that 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.

Africa, the war or colonialism feature throughout Lessing’s writing, as sites of cultural memory re-worked either fictionally or autobiographically.

‘War,’ Doris Lessing once declared, ‘has been the most important thing’ in her life (qtd, in Fishburn, 1987: 5). Her fiction repeatedly affirms this observation, for war, in its multiple guises insistently marches across the pages of Lessing’s text, leaving ruin in its wake. A child of violence – Lessing is born out of the psychic ruins of World War I, and, through her writing, she is reborn with great difficulty out of the grim holocaust of World War II. Her father was a veteran of the Great War (the Great Unmentionable); her mother was a self-martyring nurse. Lessing is the daughter of a literal embodiment of history's intertwined war and romance plot.

Colonialism complicates this image with another type of war: black/white, woman/man; that is colour, class and gender. Lessing has attempted to disrupt these patterns by illustrating the endless refrain of history – the ‘nightmare repetition’.
Lessing’s material and historical position is unique. ‘Whatever I am, I have been made so by Central Africa’ (90), she wrote in Going Home, an account of her first visit to Africa after years of self-exile. As a child of colonized Africa, she was perfectly positioned to observe that imperialism, class, and, above all, race could not be dissected outside their cultural matrix. They form an intricate pattern of discrimination and violence that she depicts in Children of Violence, The Grass is Singing, and many more of her novels.

This paper acknowledges their significance, and envisages them as sites of transgression. They never appear as separate elements or as individual themes, specific to a certain period in the author’s career, but as complexly intertwined. That is the reason why this research suggests that her workings of memory set against historical evidence are indicative of the shaping of Lessing as a writer with multiple identities.

SITES OF MEMORY AND THE SHADOW OF COLONIALISM AND WAR

Multiculturalism is the emblem of Doris Lessing’s entire literary production as well as of her whole life experience. A prolific contemporary British writer and the recipient of more than twenty literary prizes and awards, Doris May Tayler was born in Kermanshah, Persia (now Iran) and grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) until 1949, when she came to England with the manuscript of her first novel, The Grass is Singing. The novel was published in 1950, and brought its author immediate success. Since then she has never ceased writing, producing a huge number of novels, short stories, narratives, exploring a variety of themes.

After a seven-year absence, Lessing returned to Southern Rhodesia in 1956, in order to revisit the country of her childhood. At the end of her trip – during which she had been under constant surveillance by the political police – her presence was declared undesirable in both Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, because of her political views. The experiences of this trip are narrated in her book Going Home (1957), partly a personal narrative, partly a travel notebook.

The years spent in Africa influenced Lessing deeply, both as a maturing woman and as a writer. ‘Africa belongs to the Africans’, she wrote in 1956. ‘The sooner they take it back, the better. But a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it’ (Going Home, 11). Undoubtedly she is one of ‘those’ who feel at home in it, to the extent that ever since she left Africa, she has regarded herself as an exile. She is, after all, ‘an expert in unsettlement’ (Sage, 1983: 11), or, in Judith Gardiner’s words, ‘a colonial in exile’, whose work is characterized by ‘a fruitful unsettledness that makes… [her both an] inheritor…and [an] antagonist…to imperialism…. The English literary tradition is the reassuring heritage of a mother tongue, but it is also somewhat alien’ (Gardiner, 1989: 13).

Lessing is deeply influenced not only by the colonial’s ambiguous relationship to the English tradition, but also by the landscape of Africa, which causes a peculiar view on mankind. Lessing says in her introduction to African Stories:

I believe that the chief gift from Africa to writers, white and black, is the continent itself, its presence which for
some people is like an old fever, latent always in their
blood; or like an old wound throbbing in the bones as the
air changes. That is not a place to visit unless one chooses
to be an exile ever afterwards from an inexplicable
majestic silence lying just over the border of memory or
thought. Africa gives you the knowledge that man is a
small creature, among other creatures, in a large
landscape. (6)

Doris Lessing’s writing career was forged by Africa.
Her main, haunting theme is definitely grounded in the
problem of how, as a white settler, she can deal with
oppression: the inner and outer dimensions of her
condition as an exile, in Africa (where she is British)
and in ‘her’ country, where she longs for her African
experience. The tensions in Lessing’s stories clearly
rely on the coexistence of a romantic response to the
African bush and the author’s awareness that the
capitalism of the settlers was to blame, as it sought to
transform it into profitable settlements. The landscape,
its people – both black and white – Africa’s recent
history and present society, which informed most of
her first thirty years, are the subject matter of a major
part of her writing.

In her African writings, Doris Lessing works both
within and beyond the colonial experience. She
understands the rigorous limitations of colonial
society, which relies for identity and cohesion on the
attempt at maintaining its own narrow boundaries. In
spite of that, she imaginatively steps outside those
borders. This extended vision enables her to see
beyond the false colonial myth of white superiority, of
the necessity that blacks and whites should never mix.

Since her writings under scrutiny here involve
‘coming home’ in a difficult period of her life and
colonial history, I will also focus my attention on the
notions of home, memory and nostalgia in order to
suggest that Lessing revises the notion of ‘home’ so
that she becomes capable of both recognizing racial
and national differences and moving outside them.
Memory, as Lessing interprets it, becomes productive
for the individual and the nation only when it
becomes ‘re-memory’, when it can acknowledge the
importance of imagination in dealing with trauma, and
thus suggest the fluctuating, mobile status of identity.

In 1956, at the instigation of friends who reassured
her that the Federation of Southern Rhodesia had
changed the political landscape of the region, Lessing
boarded a plane for Southern Rhodesia. There are two
impulses beneath: ‘I needed to see how Rhodesia
struck me after living in a civilized country’, but
emotional reasons were equally strong: ‘I needed to
feel and smell the place’. (Lessing, Going Home, 314)

Going Home is an account of that trip and of some of
the memories it evoked. Her account is wide-ranging,
drawn from a variety of experiences. In Going
Home, Lessing meets several ‘types’ (15) of Rhodesians,
from influential political leaders to impoverished
settlers, and interviews several Africans. She revisits
the social and geographical landscape of ‘her city’ and
the rural areas, and examines some of the detrimental
effects of the Federation. She also outlines the personal
and political consequences of researching for and
writing her book – most notably, her own banning as a
prohibited immigrant in both South Africa and
Southern Rhodesia. Although Lessing strives to
maintain the text’s status as an objective document of
the impact of the Federation on the region, being
circumscribed by the objective mode of journalism, she
turns, at certain strategic points, to a more subjective
genre, the memoir, in order to write her own personal
experience of ‘going home’. This tension, between objective and subjective genres, is evident in all of Lessing’s African writings, but especially so in her pre-independence life writing.

She employs different discursive conventions, and transgresses a range of generic boundaries: autobiography, political analysis and commentary, journalistic reportage, travelogue. Narrative time is broken up and narrative perspective fractured; the authorial persona is by turns dreamer, historical authority, political analyst or object of surveillance.

Similar to Schreiner, Lessing is preoccupied with the concept of ‘home’. Just as it is difficult to place Lessing as a writer, it is difficult to place her ‘at home’, a phrase which recurs in Going Home. Lessing is ambiguous about where exactly ‘home’ is: London or Salisbury (now Harare). She describes the feeling of being ‘at home’ in London, after a year of loneliness and homesickness: ‘Then, one evening, walking across the park, the light welded buildings, trees and scarlet buses into something familiar and beautiful, and I knew myself to be at home’ (11). A few paragraphs later, she reflects: ‘Africa belongs to Africans; the sooner they take it back the better. But a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it’ (11).

Lessing is also acutely aware of the instability of home for white settlers in Southern Rhodesia. While they oppose African independence, many would never consider going to Britain as ‘going home’; however unstable, Southern Rhodesia is their home. Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin, in a discussion of feminist community, undermine ‘the seeming homogeneity, stability, and self-evidence of white identity’ (193). If there is no coherent white identity, there can be no coherent, and stable, white community.

Lessing is preoccupied not only with the idea of home, but also with its physicality; in other words, with the houses, with the buildings that people live in.

In Going Home there is a lengthy account of the construction of Lessing’s family home in the bush, to which Lessing returns, or contemplates returning in African Laughter and Under My Skin. Its presence haunts her in all her writings. There are also descriptions of the various places she has lived in; and there is commentary on the inferior dwellings most Africans are forced to occupy. Lessing is not especially nostalgic about home (although there are, understandably, such moments in the text), but is far more interested in the transience of home. Lessing, like Mohanty and Martin, challenges the idea of ‘home’ as stable, ‘bounded’, unambiguous, easy to place. And this challenge has particular political significance.

Lessing’s challenge needs to be understood as a general challenge to imperial and middle-class constructions of domesticity for, as McClintock argues, ‘imperialism (comes) into being through domesticity’ (32). In other words, the domestication of both the white working class and Africans was imperial policy.

In Going Home, Africa is not so much a geographical location as a political construct, a personal and a historical one, which cannot be comprehended as one place, but as a cluster of dominant and oppositional myths. The past, moreover, does not lead in an inevitable teleological progression into the present, but is constantly interpreted and reinterpreted. Lessing, the perceiver and writer, is herself a moving target; not going home (for the force of her title partly lies in its irony), but recalling a collection of pasts from the standpoint of an unstable present, populated by a collection of displaced identities.
Lessing’s concept of ‘home’ is also coupled with the notions of exile, nostalgia and memory.

‘Nostalgia is always suspect’, she says. To give ourselves up to longing for a different time or place, no matter how admirable its qualities, is always to run the risk of limiting our ability to act in the present. In Doris Lessing’s phrase, nostalgia is a ‘poisoned itch’ (Lessing, *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, 8). Its real cause is buried, invisible within us, and trying to reach out and grasp what we imagine we have lost will only make matters worse.

The word nostalgia originates in the Greek nostos (the return home) and algos (pain) (Jacoby, 1985: 5). Across centuries, its meaning has acquired new directions: from either a ‘betrayal of history’ or a ‘betrayal of memory itself’ (Spitzer, 1999: 91), to a critical potential. Nostalgia has become a force that complicates, rather than one that simplifies; it can be an interpretative tool rather than a retreat into certainty. Once a pressing individual demand, nostalgia has now increasingly come to indicate a condition of generalized longing, its indefinable and half-pleasant yearning a suggestive characteristic of the postmodern age (Stewart, 1988; Jameson, 1991; Hutcheon, 2000). Its meaning has also become indissolubly linked with exile, trauma and memory. Edward Said noted the exile’s inclination towards nostalgia, but also that an ‘exilic intellectual does not respond to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing change, to moving on, not standing still’ (Said, 2001 [1993]: 381).

Whatever its object, nostalgia serves as negotiation between continuity and discontinuity: it insists on the bond between our present selves and a certain fragment of the past, but also on the force of our separation from what we have lost. As subjects of modernity, theorists seem to agree that continuity of our identity resides precisely in our most personal discontinuities, in the way we have altered and created ourselves.

Instead of starting from the assumption that nostalgia is a typically unreflective form of memory, we might say that, in Lessing’s case, it functions as a kind of critical self-consciousness. From her first *African Stories* onwards, she suggests that her ‘mythic’ Africa, the remembered Rhodesia of her childhood, is at once a place of pain and suffering, and yet also the source of something that transcends, as it helps put the human condition into perspective.

Lessing consciously acknowledges that memory itself is an elusive, fluid, and often unreliable component of consciousness, the manifestations of which depend on the shifting relationship between any present moment and an always receding past. Both in *Going Home* and *African Laughter*, Lessing records her successive returns ‘home’, providing unique intertexts for the expressions of nostalgia that occur throughout her own fiction. In each of her accounts of her visits to Southern Africa, Lessing struggles over whether to return to emotionally significant locations that have shaped her imaginative vision of herself and her past. Seven years after her emigration to England, during her first return home in 1956, she visited towns and areas that had been important to her during her childhood. However, she could not bring herself to return to the location of her childhood home in the bush. The house itself, constructed of mud, cow dung, and trees, was no longer there, having been destroyed by fire some years before. Lessing also felt that she could only preserve her inner imaginative record of
'home' if she did not have to confront the visual reality of its erasure. As she expresses it,

One of the reasons I wanted to go home was to drive through the bush to the kopje and see where the house has been. But I could not bring myself to do it. Supposing, having driven miles through the bush to the place where the road opens into the big mealie land, supposing then that I had lifted my eyes expecting to see the kopje sloping up, a slope of empty, green bush – supposing then that the house was still there after all? (Going Home, 55)

Instead, Lessing recovers the house in her imagination, rescuing it from erasure through an interior salvaging operation, through dream and re-memory:

For a long time I used to dream of the collapse and decay of that house, and of the fire sweeping over it, and then I set myself to dream the other way. It was urgently necessary to recover every detail of that house. For only my own room was clear in my mind. I had to remember everything, every strand of thatch and curve of wall or heave in the floor, and every tree and bush and patch of grass around it, and how the fields and slopes of the country looked at different times of the day, in different strengths and tones of light... Over months, I recovered the memory of it all. And so what was lost and buried in my mind, I recovered from my mind, so I suppose there is no need to go back and see what exists clearly, in every detail, for so long as I live. (Going Home, 55-56)

Ironically, in this scene, the house is not so much absent as invented, and Lessing, an exile in essence, reflecting, while dreaming and remembering her own experiences, continues to chronicle the dislocations of contemporary life – geographical as well as psychological and temporal.

As Lessing remarks in Under My Skin, the first volume of her autobiography, ‘memory is a careless and lazy organ’, and ‘telling the truth or not telling it, and how much, is a lesser problem than the one of shifting perspectives, for you see your life differently at different stages, like climbing a mountain while the landscape changes with every turn in the path’ (Lessing, 12-13). For Lessing, in order to change, we must first understand how various aspects of our individual experience fit into the general, or collective experience; and for her, this means reviewing her Southern African past from one text to another.

In Alfred and Emily, Lessing uses another aspect that is part of cultural memory studies, which is the creation of an alternative history. For cultural memory studies, alternative history provides a possibility not only to analyze the memory itself but to show what influence historical facts have on personal and cultural memories and identities as well.

Hilary Dannenberg, in Coincidence and Counterfactuality; Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction, quotes Neal J. Roese and James M. Olson, who, in What Might Have Been: The Social Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking (1995), explain the urge to counterfactualize as an intrinsic mode of human thought (Roese and Olson 1-55 qtd. in Dannenberg 109).

Counterfactual thinking is an essential feature of consciousness. Few indeed have never pondered a lost opportunity nor regretted a foolish utterance. And...it is from articulations of better possible pasts that individuals may realize more desirable futures.

(Roese and Olson 46 qtd. in Dannenberg)
Dannenberg further explains that this tendency is manifest in the everyday course of events, ranging from minor counterfactuals to those we narrativize at times of personal crisis, in order to review one’s life trajectory and formulate long-term regrets about missed opportunities (Dannenberg 110). Such alternate life scenarios represent, in her view, 'the human urge for narrative liberation from the real world' (Dannenberg 110).

*Alfred and Emily*, like *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and many other of Lessing's fictions, develops its alternative reality by placing familiar people in a transformed social context. And here Lessing deliberately reveals the personal autobiographical events as she now interprets them, and which drive her to alter the inevitable past.

Triptych-like in form, *Alfred and Emily* has three panels: a novella “Alfred and Emily”; a notebook “Explanation”; and a memoir “Alfred and Emily: Two Lives.” The Foreword provides the authorial intention for this tripartite strategy. "If I could meet Alfred Tyler and Emily McVeagh now, as I have written them...I hope they would approve the lives I have given them” (viii), Lessing notes, explaining why she created in the novella an alternative fictional world for her parents, one they might have inhabited had the war not intervened. So, the novella takes the form of an alternative biography of her parents, set in an alternative twentieth century, in which England lives in perpetual peace.

Experimental in form, *Alfred and Emily* recalls the fractured narrative structure – with its compartmentalized notebooks and fiction embedded within the larger fiction – of *The Golden Notebook*. In juxtaposing fiction and nonfiction in one volume and clearly delineating which is which, *Alfred and Emily* raise questions about our changing attitudes toward memories as we age, about the different strengths of fiction and nonfiction when it comes to exploring character; and about the inherently subjective nature of memoirs.

In *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing remembers her broken, depressed and defeated parents as they appeared to her as a child in a sunny colonial Africa. Preceding the memoir is the happier fictionalized alternative, happier for the individuals and for the English nation. She imagines her parents' lives had World War I never occurred, had her father remained an athletic English farmer, rather than become a bureaucrat, then a war invalid, and later a colonist in Southern Africa, and had her mother remained in England as an efficient nurse, married to a successful doctor rather than to Lessing's father, and become a storyteller and philanthropist, rather than a sad and neurotic woman in a claustrophobic colony. She posits a world in which they meet but never marry each other or bear children together. Instead, Lessing creates a different wife for her father and comments, 'I enjoyed giving him someone warm and loving' thus striking another Oedipal blow at her cold mother (140). The most striking result of this alternative scenario is that it leads to Doris Tayler's non-existence, and at the same time it analyses the springs of Lessing's creativity and the continuing sources of her imaginative energy. By playing with the authorial persona, 'the death of the author' might seem a joke; here the author is never born. In creating these alternative trajectories, she attempts to explore the essence of her parents, thereby suggesting that fiction can reach deeper than fact.
And in so doing, Lessing also reveals quite a lot about herself: trauma and its two basic sources – the war and her mother.

Psychic trauma is generally defined as a reaction to an overpowering event, resulting in psychological damage. Instead of understanding trauma according to event and/or response, Cathy Caruth – one of the key figures in contemporary trauma theory – has redefined it according to ‘the structure of its experience’: ‘the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it’ (Caruth 1995: 4). In her conception of trauma Caruth draws on Sigmund Freud’s notion of Nachträglichkeit – a concept that refers to a non-chronological movement of remembering, involving a link between two events. A critical time of psychological distress previously forgotten, memories return and are reworked or reinterpreted to match subsequent events, desires and psychic developments. In her reformulation of Freud’s concept, Caruth emphasizes a belatedness inhering in the traumatic moment itself; the traumatic experience is not fully registered in the first place, but experienced as trauma only belatedly and somewhere else, where it re-surfaces in a fragmented form as flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and repetitive re-enactments. Rather than remembered as something that happened in the past, then, trauma becomes part of the survivor’s identity, and is compulsively performed in the present, as though it happens in real time. For Caruth, it is precisely this time-and-placelessness, the collapsing of the distances between past and present, between here and another place that constitutes the force of trauma (Caruth 4-9).

So it is gravely fitting that the memorial third panel should have as its epigraph a passage from Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* with its themes of trauma and repression:

> And dimly she realized one of the great laws of the human soul: that when the emotional soul receives a wounding shock, which does not kill the body, the soul seems to recover as the body recovers. But this is only appearance. It is, really, only the mechanism of resumed habit. Slowly, slowly the wound to the soul begins to make itself felt, like a bruise which only slowly deepens its terrible ache, till it fills all the psyche. And when we think we have recovered and forgotten, it is then that the terrible after-effects have to be encountered at their worst.

>(D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, qtd. in Alfred and Emily 151)

It is poignantly fitting that the novella should begin with the war, another traumatic image that haunts much of Lessing’s fiction:

> That war, the Great War, the war that would end all war, squatted over my childhood. The trenches were as present to me as anything I actually saw around me. And here I still am, trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free. (viii)

This impact of war on Lessing’s life is not a revelation to her, nor is it to her readers. One of her fictional triumphs was the *Children of Violence* sequence, in which the inheritance of conflict is central. Similarly, in *Under My Skin*, she wrote: ‘I wonder now how many of the children brought up in families crippled by war had the same poison running in their veins from before they could even speak’ (*Under My
The recurrent ‘now’ is characteristic of the vivid immediacy of Lessing’s writing, and also of the cycles and repetitions that there are in her work, which are evident in Alfred and Emily, too. Alfred and Emily reveals that Lessing’s memories remain essentially unaltered.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, both Going Home and Alfred and Emily continue the work of the imagination on Lessing’s experience of the past and witness her struggle with its ‘terrible after effects’. Alfred and Emily suggests that to let go of the past requires continual work, imaginative and otherwise, even when we think we have recovered from it and forgotten. Going Home has meant a reconsideration of the concept of ‘home’ and colonialism.

The analysis has revealed that Lessing either records or imagines her returns ‘home’ and struggles over the impulse to return to emotionally significant locations or historical periods that have shaped her imaginative vision of herself and her past. However, postmodern nostalgia and need for a homeland inform the author-narrator, who self-consciously acknowledges that memory is an elusive, fluid, and often unreliable component of consciousness. To her, the past is a fixed point which must be revisited critically.

REFERENCES