

## Anti-imperialism and Feminism in Margaret Laurence's African Writings

**M**argaret Laurence's anti-imperialist and feminist impulses have common origins. As she indicates in her 1978 essay "Ivory Tower or Grassroots?: The Novelist as Socio-Political Being," both stem from her upbringing in the United Church of Canada and her involvement with the "old Left" of North Winnipeg during and just after her college years, when she worked for the communist newspaper *The Westerner*. Laurence links her "feelings of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-authoritarianism" to her "growing awareness of the dilemma and powerlessness of women," concluding that the situation of "peoples with colonial mentalities, was not unlike that of women in our society" (24, 23). Her own feminism and her connection of anti-imperialism with women's issues began before the feminist movement of the 1960s and was rooted not only in her political and religious beliefs but also in the women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century. In "Books that Mattered to Me," Laurence cites Nellie McClung as a direct influence (241); as Randi Warne points out, McClung's feminism and social activism, including her work on suffrage and temperance and her battle to have women recognized as "persons" under the law, were also intimately connected to the practice of her religion.<sup>1</sup>

Western Canadian feminism of the type advocated by McClung and the socialism of the Winnipeg old Left are at the roots of the feminism and anti-imperialism evident in Laurence's five books about Africa. Despite these common origins, however, Laurence's feminist principles are sometimes at odds in her African books with her anti-imperialist beliefs. Laurence, like

me in writing this paper, struggles with what Linda Alcoff calls “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” Laurence’s dilemma is to find a way to act as witness to women’s oppression in the African countries she visited and about which she wrote, while maintaining an awareness of cultural difference and of the unequal power relations that resulted from her position as a Western outsider. As Laurence’s African writings demonstrate, the desire not to engage in “discursive imperialism” (Alcoff 17) is a powerful one.<sup>2</sup> I agree with Alcoff, however, that Western feminists have a “political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of [our] privilege” (8). In this essay, I examine and comment on the ways in which Laurence wrote about colonial structures and about women’s lives during a time when the terms “postcolonial” and “feminist” were not part of the lexicon and when the theoretical language to discuss such issues was just developing. I argue against positions that characterize Laurence’s African works as either unusually culturally sensitive in the astuteness of their commentary (Sparrow, Githae-Mugo), or flawed in the way they appropriate African voices or universalize African experiences (Richards). Instead, I conclude that although Laurence’s writings about women’s lives and about issues such as child prostitution and female genital mutilation reveal some imperialist inheritance, they also show how tensions between anti-imperialism and feminism may be reconciled.

Laurence’s five books about Africa are inextricably tied to the process of decolonization in the three African countries about which she wrote. The first four books were researched, written, and published during the years when a break with the colonial past was occurring in the British Somaliland Protectorate (which became part of the independent country of Somalia in 1960) and the Gold Coast (which became Ghana in 1957); the last book was published during the Nigerian civil war, eight years after Nigeria’s independence in 1960. Laurence first travelled to Africa to live with her husband in the British Somaliland Protectorate from early 1951 to mid-1952. In Somalia, Jack Laurence served as the Canadian engineer hired by the British colonial government to build desert reservoirs to collect runoff from rainwater, while Margaret Laurence worked on translating the Somali poems and stories that were published in 1954 as *A Tree for Poverty*. Her account of her life and travels in Somalia, *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*, was not published until 1963.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, she had written two books of fiction set in the Gold Coast, where the Laurences lived from late 1952 to early 1957 and where Jack Laurence worked as an engineer in the construction of the port of Tema.

*This Side Jordan*, a novel about the end of colonial rule, was published in 1960, while *The Tomorrow-Tamer*, a book of short stories set just before, during, and after independence, was published in 1963. Laurence's last African work, a book of criticism about Nigerian novelists and playwrights, was researched at a distance through the literature of the country. It began as notes for a proposed BBC radio documentary but eventually became *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966*, published in 1968.

The first three of Laurence's Manawaka books, *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), and *The Fire Dwellers* (1969), were begun during the early to mid-1960s; thus her Canadian fiction does not mark a distinct temporal break from, but overlaps with, her African texts. Several critics of Laurence's work have identified thematic connections between her African and Canadian works, including a continuing focus on what Konrad Groß calls "freedom and dependence or dominance and subordination" (78; see also Morley). Laurence's burgeoning feminism is evident in many ways in the Manawaka books (and later in her memoir, *Dance On the Earth*), but especially in her representation of women's lives, including women's domestic lives, as a subject of fundamental interest to readers; her descriptions of sexuality and childbirth; her rewriting of the myth of the evil stepmother; and her "writing beyond the ending" (DuPlessis 197) of the romance plot to show women as mothers and elderly women. Her African writings signal the beginning of a career-long feminist commitment and introduce the inter-sections of gender and colonialism with which she grappled throughout her writing life. Laurence had few practical or theoretical models for her comments on gender and sexuality in the African colonial context. Nevertheless, all five African books deal to varying extents with the effects on women's lives of both pre-existing patriarchal structures and colonial situations, and examine issues such as forced early marriage, bride-price, polygyny, spousal abuse, compulsory mothering, prostitution, and female genital mutilation.

Laurence learned about the links between colonialism and feminism during her travels through Somaliland and the Gold Coast. She discovered that colonial rule is paternalistic; that colonialism can exacerbate pre-existing patriarchal institutions such as forced prostitution; and that colonized land is often represented by travellers and writers as a woman to be raped and silenced, while the colonized woman is represented as virgin territory to be conquered by the European man.<sup>4</sup> As a result of these experiences, in her later writings about Africa, Laurence included women in her analysis of colonial situations (something that other writers often failed to do) and

sought to avoid the kind of cultural imperialism that would have had her impose her belief system on cultures outside her own experience.<sup>5</sup> Her desire to accomplish these sometimes contradictory tasks produces tensions in her writing. In *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, her observations about women's lives are constrained by an impulse to avoid being judgmental, while in *This Side Jordan*, her need to criticize colonialism leads her to step back from the feminist critique on which she has initially embarked. Laurence begins a reconciliation of these tensions, however, by focusing on the material details of women's and men's lives that provide evidence of power relations in colonial situations.

Although Laurence is directly linked to the Somali colonial government through her husband's work and through a brief period when she worked as the colonial administrator's secretary, she initially represents herself as a Canadian anti-imperialist. Her bias is not against Somalis; instead, as she writes, mocking her earlier naïve attitude, "I believed that the overwhelming majority of Englishmen in colonies could properly be classified as imperialists, and my feeling about imperialism was very simple—I was against it" (25). Laurence represents her anti-imperialist sentiments as stemming from the condescension of the British toward Canadian colonials. Her subsequent description of "the imperialists" in Somalia is sometimes scathing, although she insists that she is being restrained. She assumes that Somalis will recognize her difference from British imperialists; as she writes, "I felt somehow that I would be immune from their bitterness, for did I not feel friendly towards them?" (34).

One of Laurence's purposes in writing *The Prophet's Camel Bell* is to provide a counter-narrative to previous imperialist discourse about Africa such as Richard Burton's 1856 *First Footsteps in East Africa*. By referring repeatedly to Burton's account, Laurence undoubtedly acknowledges that "the narrative of travel derives its authority from its pre-texts as much as from original observations" (Gikandi 97). At the same time, her account also directly counters Burton's racist and Eurocentrist narrative, which refers to Somalis as "a barbarous people, who honour body, and degrade mind to mere cunning" (1894: 33). Laurence points out that while Burton believed that "his footsteps were the first that really counted for anything in East Africa," he had in fact "come late in the roster of explorers" of that region (12). Her own narrative provides a history of the area that shows that a complex society flourished long before Burton's visit. She follows directly in his footsteps when she visits the mosque where he boasted that, in the dis-

guise of an Arab merchant, he had preached so skilfully that he was commended for his knowledge of the Koran; she then undermines his self-important comments by telling her readers that “No one here had ever heard of Burton” (119).

Later in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, Laurence borrows from and transforms a discussion of the mentality of the colonizers that appeared in O. Mannoni's 1950 *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*. She read an English translation of Mannoni's psychological interpretation of the struggle for independence in Madagascar around 1960, eight years after she left Somalia and a year or two before she wrote *The Prophet's Camel Bell*.<sup>6</sup> Her reading came, she writes in that book, “with the shock of recognition one sometimes feels when another's words have a specific significance in terms of one's own experiences” (208). In describing the people she calls “imperialists,” Laurence quotes long passages from Mannoni's analysis of colonials in Madagascar (249-51). Adapting his theories to Somalia, she concludes that the Westerners she met there were “not people who were motivated by a brutally strong belief in their own superiority, but people who were so desperately uncertain of their own worth and their ability to cope within their own societies that they were forced to seek some kind of mastery in a place where all the cards were stacked in their favour” (226).

In her first published novel, set in the Gold Coast as it is about to become the independent nation of Ghana, Laurence is also critical of the imperialist project. *This Side Jordan* is written through the alternating viewpoints of two men—one European, the other African—and enters most deeply into the thoughts of an African character, Nathaniel Amegbe, through the use of interior monologue. As Laurence wrote nine years after the novel was published, “I actually wonder how I ever had the nerve to attempt to go into the mind of an African man, and I suppose if I'd really known how difficult was the job I was attempting, I would never have tried it” (“Gadgetry or Growing” 82). Laurence allows the African characters more of an opportunity to speak than is common in Western literature about Africa, and thus assigns them some agency in the colonial situations described—a courageous but risky venture in the literary milieu of the mid- to late twentieth century, considering the potential for charges of appropriation of voice.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on inner voice makes her African protagonist a much more sympathetically drawn character than his European counterpart, the overtly racist and sexist Johnnie Kestoe, and allows for an intimate portrayal of Ghanaian culture and history. As *The Prophet's Camel Bell* would later do with Somaliland,

Laurence's novel also reflects on the prejudices of the imperialists in the Gold Coast; her European characters are, with one exception, racist critics of their servants, workers, and adopted land. Her novel looks forward to independence through the eyes of both Nathaniel and a third male character, his friend Victor. Laurence herself points out that while her African books do not "ignore some of the inevitable casualties of social change, both African and European, . . . they do reflect the predominantly optimistic outlook of many Africans and many western liberals in the late 1950s and early 1960s" ("Ten Years' Sentences" 11).

Laurence's optimism about the future of the formerly colonized African countries and her desire to counter imperialist perspectives led her to transcribe and translate Somali poetry and stories and to write a book about Nigerian novels and plays. *A Tree for Poverty* demonstrates the existence of a rich Somali culture threatened by colonialism, while *Long Drums and Cannons* focuses on the renewal of indigenous culture during and after the dismantling of colonial rule. Whether she accomplished her task of recovering this literature effectively has been the subject of some debate; her translations, for example, have been judged either as astonishingly accessible to Western readers or as oversimplified and guilty of universalizing human experience.<sup>8</sup> In *Long Drums and Cannons*, Laurence argues that the scars of colonialism "can be seen outlined with bitter clarity in the novels of such writers as Chinua Achebe" (8). She notes approvingly that much Nigerian literature of the postcolonial era is an attempt to recover some of the society's pre-colonial history and culture. In a passage that Achebe later endorsed, Laurence writes, "No writer of any quality has viewed the old Africa in an idealised way, but they have tried to regain what is rightfully theirs—a past composed of real and vulnerable people, their ancestors, not the figments of missionary and colonialist imaginations" (200). With *Long Drums and Cannons*, however, Laurence has been accused, as she was with *A Tree for Poverty*, of continuing the tradition of searching for universal themes in African literature, an accusation that has some justification (Richards 28). She writes, for example, that Nigerian literature, as with "literature everywhere," gives insight "not only into immediate and local dilemmas but, through these, into the human dilemma as a whole" (10); that "The best of these Nigerian plays and novels reveal something of ourselves to us, whoever and wherever we are" (10); and that a book by a Nigerian writer has "an unfaltering authenticity which in turn helps to extend the novel's meaning beyond any one culture" (177).

Laurence does claim in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* that during her stay in Somaliland she gradually became conscious of her inability to interpret African culture except through her own cultural biases, including her inheritance of the British imperial tradition. She writes, "This was something of an irony for me, to have started out in righteous disapproval of the empire-builders, and to have been forced at last to recognize that I, too, had been of that company" (251). In the years after she wrote *A Tree for Poverty*, Laurence certainly became more attuned to the possibility of cultural insensitivity in writing about an unfamiliar society. Her chapter on Somali oral literature in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* is taken almost directly from *A Tree for Poverty*, but the minor changes she makes reflect her desire to avoid the conflation of Somali religious beliefs with Western Christian beliefs; for example, as Fiona Sparrow notes, Laurence replaces all references to *God* in the earlier book with the word *Allah* in the later one (146). As Laurence's quest for universal themes in the literature of Somalia and Nigeria indicates, however, she is understandably unable to recognize all of her own biases. Even when she is proclaiming her lack of racism in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, she repeatedly stereotypes Somalis as "expressionless" (24), "timeless" (115), and "inscrutable" (207). Her behaviour, like her language, is in some respects determined by the fact that she is the Canadian wife of an agent of the British colonial government. Thus although she initially resists having servants and being called *Memsahib*, "a word which seemed to have connotations of white man's burden, paternalism, everything I did not believe in" (23), she quickly capitulates to both. As she makes clear to readers, she defers to her husband's insistence that "You don't tote your own luggage here. It just isn't done" (23).

The pervasive influence of imperialist doctrine on Laurence's writing is evident in her adoption of Mannoni's theory that colonized peoples have a prior need to be dependent. Mannoni writes that "colonization has always required the existence of the need for dependence. Not all peoples can be colonized; only those who experience this need" (85). Thus the coming of Europeans, he argues, "was unconsciously expected—even desired—by the future subject peoples" (86). Mannoni's concept of a "dependence complex" has since been refuted by theorists beginning with Frantz Fanon in 1952 (*Black Skin, White Masks*) and Aimé Césaire in 1955 (*Discourse on Colonialism*). As Fanon writes, dependence is not innate but is instead the result of "the arrival of white colonizers" (108): "*It is the racist who creates his inferior*" (93). In Laurence's analysis of her relationship with one of her Somali servants, she makes use of Mannoni's theories about the dependence

complex and about the transference of the Malagasies' reverence toward their ancestors onto the colonizers who employed and protected them. While Mannoni points out that the Malagasies referred to both their ancestors and the colonial administrators as "the father and also the mother" (61), Laurence writes that her and Jack's Somali employees viewed them like parents (189) or like a king and queen (200, 209). In characterizing colonial employers in that way, Laurence argues, the Somalis could feel they had allied themselves with "strong" and "capable" protectors (209) and that their dependence thus was justified. Laurence adopts this theory as a retroactive and revisionary way of explaining the troubled relationship that she and Jack had with their driver, Abdi, who at first was friendly but who later bitterly rejected them. As Margaret reinterpreted the situation in 1963, Jack had entered into "a tacit agreement to act as a kind of protector to him and his family. . . . His later and increased demands . . . seem in retrospect to have been a frantic effort to prove that the bond still existed" (*Prophet's Camel Bell* 208). Mannoni's description of the dependence complex, she writes, provided her with a "clue to the puzzle" of Abdi (207).<sup>9</sup>

Just as Laurence's African texts sometimes reveal an inheritance and replication of imperialist discourse, their critique of the status of women in colonized African societies is at times tentative. In the case of *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, one reason for this hesitancy might be the gap between research and composition of the book. During that gap of about ten years, Laurence became more aware of issues relating to women's oppression, gained more access to theoretical models that would aid her analysis, and experienced the effects of gender typing in her own life. She travelled in Somalia when she was in her mid-twenties and childless, but by the time she wrote her travel narrative she had personal experience with the frustrations of trying to take care of children, keep house, and continue to write. She was also in the midst of writing her first published novel about a woman's life—*The Stone Angel*—which she set aside in order to complete *The Prophet's Camel Bell*. Although in her travel narrative Laurence clearly takes on a role as witness to women's oppression and thus in one sense continues the work begun in her draft of *The Stone Angel*, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* reveals a gap between her impulses and her actions regarding such oppression.

During the 1950s and early 1960s when Laurence was researching and writing her books about Africa, she had access to few feminist conceptual models, other than McClung's early didactic feminism, that would have given her the theoretical language to write about women's lives. Laurence



read and was influenced by Virginia Woolf, but found Woolf's prose lacking in "ordinariness, dirt, earth, blood, yelling, a few messy kids" (*Dance on the Earth* 130). Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* was published the same year as *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, but its frame of reference—middle-class North American women—was at such variance with the situation of women in Somalia that its concepts could not have been usefully applied. Books such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, which provide broader feminist theoretical models and at least mention the issues of clitoridectomy and infibulation (Millet 46, Greer 260) about which Laurence also wrote, were not published until 1969 and 1970 respectively, well after Laurence began writing about women's lives in Africa and Canada. Laurence had to create her own language to write about women and had to come to her own conclusions. As she writes, the "upsurge of the new women's movement in the 1960's" simply confirmed her approach and gave her "a much-needed sense of community" ("Ivory Tower" 23).

In her African writings, Laurence appears at first glance almost to ignore women, something that will surprise readers of the women-centred Manawaka series. Only three of the stories in *The Tomorrow-Tamer* have women as protagonists, and *This Side Jordan* is told through the joint perspectives of two male protagonists. Most of the Somalis about whom Laurence writes in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* are men, and almost all of the literature she transcribes and translates in *A Tree for Poverty* and criticizes in *Long Drums and Cannons* is by men. Nevertheless, Laurence does indicate in her African books at least an initial awareness of, and attention to, the conditions of women's lives. In *Long Drums and Cannons*, Laurence makes few comments about Nigerian gender relations or the effect colonization has on issues of gender, but her description of Nigerian literature reveals something of women's status in the country. Many of the works take polygyny as a given, and women are seldom protagonists of the novels or plays. Laurence notes that in one of the few Nigerian novels with a woman protagonist, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, "the novel is not so much about her as about the effect she has upon the three men who involve themselves . . . with her life" (178). Only one of the eleven writers Laurence discusses is female, although this is not surprising, since Flora Nwapa was the only Nigerian woman who had published a book by the mid-1960s. In her discussion of Nwapa, Laurence alludes to differences between Nwapa's novel *Efuru* and the books by Nigerian men. She points out, for example, that "*Efuru* takes place almost totally within the minds and the society of

women" (190), and that the concerns of these women are with childlessness and changing customs about societal issues such as the bride-price. Thus although comparisons between men's and women's literature are not explicit in Laurence's criticism, and although she tends to sidestep gender issues, representing them in neutral terms as part of Nigeria's cultural makeup, her analysis does provide glimpses into women's lives in Nigeria.

Laurence's earliest consideration of gender relations in an African country can be found in *A Tree for Poverty*, which she completed in 1952 and left with the Somali colonial government for later publication. In her introduction to the translations of Somali oral literature, Laurence briefly discusses women's place within Somali society: "Both tribal and religious traditions place women's status as infinitely inferior to that of men. . . . The double standard is extremely strong" (30). Laurence's assessments of women poets and of the representation of women in men's poetry provide graphic examples of the status of women. Laurence was told that some Somali women composed poems but, since Somalia was rigidly divided along gender lines, they could recite them only to other women. Because of this gender segregation, and because her translators were men, Laurence could provide no examples of women's poetry. She was assured by her male informants, however, that women's poems were never about love, the major subject of men's short poems, since "here only prostitutes sing love-songs" (27).

Women thus are depicted through men's eyes alone in the poems and stories that Laurence translates. Many of the male poets' short love poems dwell on women's physical appearance; the only other poetic reference to a woman is in a longer poem in which a faithless friend is said to have a memory as "short as any woman's" memory about the pain of childbirth (55). In the traditional stories that Laurence includes in her book, men are almost always the heroes or likable villains, although one story tells of a mother-daughter pair of cannibal women who eat their husbands and two other stories of a wise girl who marries the sultan, whom she then outwits. In that last story, a subplot is the sexual double standard in Somalia. The sultan's wife outwits him by obeying his impossible order—to become pregnant and bear a child during the year he is away, yet at the same time to remain faithful to him—by following him and disguising herself as another woman, whom he seduces. Her cleverness at outwitting him is the moral of the story; his infidelity is accepted and expected male behaviour (120). The literature that Laurence presents thus reveals aspects of Somali gender relations that include the double standard and the focus on women as sexual

objects (indicated by the emphasis in love poems on their physical appearance). The inaccessibility of women's own literature further exemplifies their restricted place in society.

The segregation of Somali women and the fact that Laurence accompanied her husband to work camps full of Somali men meant that she met and interacted with relatively few women during the year and a half she lived in Somalia. *The Prophet's Camel Bell* reflects that limitation, focusing mostly on descriptions of men, especially in the book's several chapters of character sketches. Laurence saw enough of women's lives, however, to conclude that "the status of women was low, according to both tribal and religious traditions" (103). As this passage indicates, her general observations about women are revisions of earlier opinions expressed in her introduction to *A Tree for Poverty*. *The Prophet's Camel Bell* goes further than *A Tree for Poverty*, examining in more detail gender roles in Somali society, including marriage and childrearing, and broaching the issues of child prostitution and what is sometimes inaccurately called female circumcision.<sup>10</sup> During Laurence's travels in the desert, she learned that Somali girls changed hands from father to husband through the mechanism of a bride-price, that Somali society was polygynous, and that although men often married girls of their choice, young women could be married against their wills to men old enough to be their grandfathers. Once a couple was married, Laurence writes, "Sexual fidelity was demanded of her, but not of him" (*The Prophet's Camel Bell* 103). Wife-beating was an accepted norm and, when one Somali man learned that Jack Laurence did not beat Margaret, he told her "that was carrying consideration too far" (197).<sup>11</sup>

Laurence learned about attitudes toward women not just through observing how others lived, but through the way she herself was treated. One day when Jack was away and several elders came to talk about the water reservoirs he was building, Margaret invited them into the house to explain the project. Her servant later told her that "a woman alone in the house must never invite men in, not even if they happen to be about eighty years old," and that "the elders could certainly not discuss any serious matter with a woman" (41). Although Laurence was linked to the colonizing group, her gender placed her at a lower status than even the colonized men; she was in "a dominant position of race and a subordinate one of gender" (Sharpe 12). In a similar way, comments made to Laurence about her childlessness reflected Somali attitudes toward mothering. Acquaintances repeatedly greeted her with the words "I pray Allah grant you a son" (73), and when

she became pregnant and moved from the desert to the city of Hargeisa, a Somali woman suggested that Laurence's husband must be glad that she was having a child: "You have been married five years—a long time," she told Laurence. "If you did not bear him a child soon, he would have had to divorce you" (255). Laurence thus learned first-hand that in Somalia, "A childless woman is nothing; she is as good as dead," in part because "African male pride refuses to accept any responsibility for sterility" (Githae-Mugo 144). Indeed, after Laurence left Somalia, she wrote in several works of fiction about the cultural imperative for African women to have children and the inability of some men to take responsibility for infertility, which leads them to abandon old, barren wives in favour of new ones.

In *This Side Jordan*, the pain of childlessness is briefly explored through several characters, while in the story "A Fetish for Love," infertility is the main subject. The protagonist, Constance, takes an interest in Love, the teenaged wife of her old servant, when she discovers that he beats Love because she is unable to have children. Constance disapproves of the ju-ju woman Love consults and instead substitutes her own "fetish" (medicine from the European doctor) before she discovers that it is the husband who is infertile. Laurence's story explores the conditions of some women's lives in the Gold Coast during colonial rule, including their forced early marriage, the cultural imperative for them to have children, the refusal of their husbands to take responsibility for infertility, and the societal acceptance of spousal abuse. The story also serves as a criticism of Western meddling—something Laurence identified and criticized in herself—and portrays the helplessness of a Western woman to intervene when an African woman is being abused.

Laurence's own reluctance to intervene is most evident in her experience with child prostitution and genital excision and infibulation in Somalia. She encountered prostitution when a family that ran a small "tea-shop-cum-brothel" attached itself to the construction camp in which she and Jack lived. Invoking her husband's opinion, and equating it with her own, Laurence writes that they "did not mind" that the family was operating a brothel (*The Prophet's Camel Bell* 156). Instead, they were more concerned that the family was using up the camp's meagre water supply, since every time a construction employee visited the brothel, he took some water with him. Laurence describes her husband's reaction to the theft as "annoyance," and quotes him as saying that he decided to give the *jes* or family group a daily ration of water because "The *jes* provides amenities of one kind and another" (157). The implications of the Laurences' hands-off approach are

not evident until Laurence reveals that the prostitutes include not just an old woman and an “attractive girl of about sixteen,” but also a girl of eight who “had a curiously vacant and withdrawn look” (156, 157). Laurence chillingly writes, “There was a special name for such children, which meant literally ‘a small opening’” (157). As her comment indicates, to Somali men the child is named by her vagina, just as in other patriarchal societies women are named in relation to the sexual services they provide.

In relating her dealings with this child, who was called Asha, Laurence foregrounds the problem of translation, a problem exacerbated by the fact that all her translators were men. As she writes, “We did not talk much, Asha and I, for I did not know what to say to her. . . . My knowledge of Somali was too limited, and who would I get to translate?” (157). Translation was undoubtedly a concern, but what Laurence’s account fails to acknowledge is that a larger concern was that men who were part of her camp were abusing a little girl, and that their society appeared to condone such abuse. Instead, Laurence places the majority of the blame, and the source of her own inaction, on difficulties of translation, and on another woman. As Laurence writes, “If we forbade the *jes* to stay near the camp, the crone would only move her trade elsewhere, so the child would be no better off. Here at least Asha got enough water” (157). Although Laurence recognizes that she might find allies within Somali society, she characterizes any action she might take as “meddling” or “interfering” (157, 158). Laurence might have felt unequal to the task of disrupting her husband’s work camp, especially since, as she implies, he would not have supported such action. She might have recognized that the colonial employment that separated men from their families encouraged them to turn to prostitutes for sex. For whatever reason, Laurence did nothing about Asha, but she was troubled enough by the experience that she later wrote a short story in which one of the characters is a child who is rescued from a life of prostitution. In “The Rain Child,” the girl is only six and has long been separated from her family, but she is significantly named Ayesha. The story is undoubtedly a kind of exorcism for Laurence: while she is unable to negotiate cultural differences that prevent her from intervening on behalf of a real child, she is able to imagine such an intervention in her fiction.

Laurence’s dealings with women who had experienced genital excision and infibulation, as reported in *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*, show an increasing reluctance to meddle in an unfamiliar culture. When she first arrives in Somalia, Laurence is willing to pose questions about the practice. She asks two young male teachers who speak English a direct question: “Did the

clitoridectomy make it impossible for Somali women to enjoy sex?" (47). Their answer to this question and to several other related questions (including "What did the Somali bride-price actually involve? Did men love their wives or merely regard them as possessions? Could a woman divorce her husband for infidelity?") is that they "did not know" (47). Laurence takes their reply as a reproof and writes in the same passage that she is appalled by the brashness of her own questions. Her curiosity about women's lives thus is transformed into a reluctance to interrogate gender differences.

Laurence emphasizes her desire not to meddle during her interaction with the desert women who, hearing of her skill in first aid, come to ask if she can give them any medication to relieve the menstrual pain caused by infibulation. Because she wants to be sensitive to cultural difference, she is willing to appear less informed than she is; as she writes, "Somali girls underwent some operation at puberty, the exact nature of which I had been unable to determine, partly because in our early days here every Somali to whom I put this question gave me a different answer, and partly because I no longer questioned people in this glib fashion" (75). Although the word "operation" is certainly inaccurate to describe a procedure that was done outside hospital and without anaesthetic, and that often led to infection, Laurence goes on to give a fairly accurate description of excision and infibulation: "The operation was either a removal of the clitoris, or a partial sewing together of the labia, or perhaps both. But whatever was done, apparently a great many women had considerable pain with menstruation and intercourse, and the birth of their children was frequently complicated by infection" (75). As Laurence learned, ninety-eight percent of Somali women undergo genital excision, and eighty to ninety percent the most radical form of excision and infibulation.<sup>12</sup> She notes that the subsequent back-up of menstrual blood often causes pain; that the thick scar tissue leads to painful sexual experiences; and that the inelasticity of the scar brings further complications at childbirth, when the inevitable tearing of surrounding tissue may be followed by chronic infection. Considering the lack of theoretical models available to Laurence, the feminist statement she makes in broaching this practice is a powerful one.<sup>13</sup> Because she wants to avoid the cultural imperialism implied by too detailed questioning, however, Laurence does not delve into the societal reasons for excision, except to repeat the commonly held belief that women are responsible for its continuation. She quotes "an educated Somali friend" who has told her that "the old women would never agree to its being abandoned" (75). Laurence's

discomfort with excision and infibulation, her reluctance to question the procedures in detail, is emphasized by her abrupt reply to the women: "I have nothing to give you. Nothing." The only painkillers Laurence has are Aspirin and, as she concludes, "the lunatic audacity of shoving a mild pill at their total situation was more than I could stomach" (76). As with the child Asha, another female turned into "a small opening," Laurence does not know what to do. She can only acknowledge that excision is just one part of the women's "total situation."

In her book on Laurence's African writings, Sparrow approves of Laurence's hesitancy, arguing that because "Somali women lived according to customs totally different from her own, . . . [i]t was not, indeed, right that she should criticize the practise openly" (37). Laurence's reluctance is understandable, especially in light of recent essays by writers such as Kadiatu Kanneh, who argues that

"Female circumcision" has become almost a dangerous trope in Western feminisms for the muting and mutilation of women—physically, sexually and psychologically—and for these women's need for Western feminism. Circumcision, clitoridectomy, infibulation, become one visible marker of outrageous primitivism, sexism, and the Third World woman. (347)

Kanneh dismisses North American and European assessments of genital excision as "arrogant and culturally 'superior' Western interference and insult" (348). In light of this essay, it is clear why Margaret Laurence, a self-described anti-imperialist, might want to avoid interfering with or insulting Somali cultural practices, and thus might avoid commenting on them in detail.

Such comment is essential, however, for those concerned with women's lives, and is made by writers such as Françoise Lionnet, who discusses excision and infibulation while taking note of the potential for cultural and religious imperialism in doing so. Lionnet recognizes the conflict between, on the one hand, the "respect for the cultural autonomy of African societies that denounce any feminist intervention as 'acculturation' to Western standards," and, on the other, the "universal ethical imperative against the physical torture and psychological impairment of millions of women" (131). She does what Laurence is unable to accomplish, given her historical situation, her lack of models, and her self-imposed ideological constraints: she canvasses the cultural reasons for the procedure. As Lionnet argues,

the reasons for the continued performance of this practice are compelling psychosexual ones for those involved, since it is embedded in a cultural context that encodes it as a beautifying and enriching phenomenon without which girls do

not become women and will therefore never be able to marry, have some degree of economic security, and lead “full” female lives. (157)

Thus excision and infibulation, she concludes, “are not just irrational and aberrant abuses” but are “part of a coherent, rational, and workable system” (165). Understanding the practice does not mean that it cannot be criticized, and Lionnet’s critique is evident in her analysis of works by writers such as Nawal El Saadawi who have experienced excision and who describe the practice as part of an overall patriarchal social system. Sylvie Fainzang puts it well when she writes, “The sexual marking provided by excision is the necessary condition of access to a specific social status, that of *woman subjected to the authority of man*” (178; translation by F. Lionnet). Like prostitution, excision and infibulation are cultural markers of men’s ownership of women, since if women are property they can be either sold into prostitution or sexually mutilated to raise their value in the marriage exchange. Excision thus is identified as one aspect of women’s place within their society—what Laurence calls their “total situation.”

Laurence’s critique of female genital mutilation, like that of child prostitution, is more explicit in her fiction than in her travel narrative. The practice is discussed in a pivotal scene in *This Side Jordan*, published three years before *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*. At first glance, Laurence’s novel appears to resist a feminist analysis. It is, after all, told through two masculine viewpoints, rather than through the viewpoints of the women characters, who include Johnnie Kestoe’s wife, Miranda, and Nathaniel Amegbe’s wife, Aya. Feminist commentators often view Miranda as a thinly disguised version of Laurence, as she describes herself both in *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* and in the essay “The Very Best Intentions” (Morley 84, Martens 13, Pell 41). Miranda, with her brash questions, her naïve enthusiasm for African culture, and her sometimes harmful impulse to meddle, may be too much like Laurence to be placed comfortably at the centre of the narrative.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Laurence writes about the dismantling of the patriarchal colonial structure in the Gold Coast from the perspective of those with power—the men. European protagonist Johnnie Kestoe, an Irishman raised in London, seeks to gain the power of the colonizer, while African protagonist Nathaniel Amegbe seeks to retain the power of the patriarch. Laurence’s choice of the masculine point of view, reflecting as it does the patriarchal nature of colonial power, is both disturbing and effective. So, too, is her decision to represent the struggle toward decolonization in Ghana alongside a parallel gender struggle between the male protagonists and their female partners.



The two women are pregnant, and pregnancy adds to the gender conflict both couples experience. Throughout the novel, Aya unsuccessfully resists Nathaniel's efforts to force her to have her baby in a hospital. He believes that his son's life must begin in the "new" way, while she is afraid to have a child without the support of her mother and other women of her family group. Miranda's pregnancy, meanwhile, brings to a head her husband's conflicting feelings of possession of and repulsion by the female body. Although the novel is written in third person, the narrative is often limited to the perspective of one or the other of the male characters; thus Miranda's pregnant body is described through Johnnie's eyes as "the mound that had once been a body belonging to her, and to him. Now it belonged to neither of them, but only to the half-formed sluglike thing inside her, straining food from her blood" (8-9).

In a scene of the novel that was politely ignored by early reviewers such as Mary Renault but has since been the focus of much feminist comment (Osachoff, Leney, Collu, Sparrow, Busia), Johnnie rapes a young, excised woman who has just been sold into prostitution. While it is not surprising that this scene has received so much scrutiny, it is just one part of the exploration in this novel of attitudes toward women in general and African women in particular. Throughout, Johnnie's simultaneous sexual attraction to and revulsion by African women is explicitly stated. This attraction-revulsion is part of a long-standing trope that links land to be conquered with woman to be raped in the imperialist literary tradition of books such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As Abena Busia writes, in Western literature about Africa, white men are "seen with peculiar frequency lusting after the black female flesh of a people they continue to hold in contempt" ("Miscegenation as Metonymy" 367). Indeed, in the first pages of Laurence's novel, Johnnie Kestoe, a man "who didn't like Africans," is dancing with a young African woman and feeling an "itch of desire" (1, 4). Johnnie's unwilling attraction to African women is pointed out several times in the novel (87, 134). His assault on the young prostitute is preceded by a scene in which he makes sexual advances toward an even younger girl, whom he then strikes when he feels himself rebuffed (135). The girl is his old servant's 14-year-old "small wife"; as Laurence makes clear, in the patriarchal culture of colonial Gold Coast an old man can take a teenager as second wife if his first is childless. The link between gender oppression and colonization becomes evident when the man, learning of his employer's assault, beats the girl. He cannot take out his anger on his colonial employer, but he can take it out on what he considers his own property—his wife.

Patriarchy merges with imperialist brutality when, with the connivance of several Ghanaian men, including Nathaniel, Johnnie sexually brutalizes an inexperienced prostitute. Busia rightly argues that the “unacknowledged association” between the European and African men in this passage doubly victimizes the African woman, exemplifying as it does “[t]he complicit power of patriarchal institutions, native and colonial” (“Silencing Sycorax” 93 n 92). The girl, who is from the north of the country where female genital excision is practised, is “very young, not more than sixteen, . . . perhaps younger” (*This Side Jordan* 229), and both Johnnie and Nathaniel speculate that she has been sold into prostitution by the male members of her family. She is also a kind of “human sacrifice,” given to Johnnie so that he will not persecute Nathaniel (227). Even the language used to describe her is that of sacrifice: “She lay spreadeagled, sheeplike, waiting for the knife” (231). Although Johnnie realizes that the girl he has been offered as a bribe is very young and may not be sexually experienced, he decides that “None of that was his concern. She was an African whore. That was all he needed to know about her” (229). Even when he discovers that she is a virgin, he ignores her cry of pain, and indeed revels in hurting her. Like colonizers who justify oppression by representing colonized peoples as subhuman, he views her as “an animal, a creature hardly sentient, a thing” (230).

The linkage of gender with imperialism is spelled out: “She was a continent and he an invader, wanting both to possess and to destroy” (231). Feminist commentators have variously criticized or defended this restatement of the metaphor of Africa as woman to be conquered.<sup>15</sup> Criticism is often based on a failure to note that the metaphor is endorsed neither by Laurence nor by an omniscient narrator, but instead is an expression of Johnnie Kestoe’s point of view. Since Johnnie uses the trope as a way of explaining and thus justifying his brutality, its presence in the narrative indicates the pervasive and harmful power of such metaphors. Busia astutely points out that the entire narrative of the rape is expressed through a series of reflections in Johnnie’s mind, “which serve as a deliberate ironic commentary on the use of the black woman as the symbol of the virgin land to be tamed by the European” (91). She argues that Laurence uses the trope in *This Side Jordan* to show that “the despised body-as-land/land-as-body of the native woman . . . must be possessed, not as object of desire but as assaulted object, in order to signal dominion and establish ‘civilized’ order” (91). Thus Johnnie Kestoe, who is angry with both his wife and Nathaniel, must brutally assault a young woman in order to establish his

power and control over women and Africans in general. The woman he assaults, meanwhile, remains almost completely silenced. Although Laurence revises the trope by pointing out its patriarchal underpinnings, she cannot go further and allow the woman to speak; the collaborative powers of patriarchy and colonialism unite to repress any speech she might attempt. They even repress her name; she is known only as Emerald, a name chosen by her African procurers.

The silenced and unnamed Ghanaian woman in Laurence's novel is also excised, a fact that reinforces her oppression by the joint patriarchal structures. Laurence's narrative provides some detail about the procedure of genital excision, which she expands upon in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*. As she writes in *This Side Jordan*, from Johnnie's gradually enlightening point of view,

Among certain peoples, the clitoridectomy was performed at puberty. By a bush surgeon—some fetish priestess, perhaps. Some of them were said to use the long wicked acacia thorns as needles. The wounds often became infected and did not heal for a long time. (233)

In this brief passage, Laurence indicates the instruments used and the results of the procedure. Her narrative then emphasizes the fact that genital scarring is torn open during sexual intercourse. The description of the blood that pours from the young woman's genitals because "The scars had opened when he savaged her" (233) reverses the characters' roles by turning the colonizer-rapist into the savage.

At the same time, the suffering young woman not only is silent but also is a very minor character whose role in the novel is primarily to effect a transformation in the male protagonist. The woman suffers pain so that Johnnie can have a moment of redemption. He can look at an African and see that "She was someone, a woman who belonged somewhere" (233). Through her, he can recognize that the Ghanaians whose colonial domination he has been perpetuating are people, more like him than unlike him.<sup>16</sup> By having Johnnie concede the error of his racist ways, Laurence attempts to bring about a closure that provides a critique of colonialism. Before Johnnie can experience his moment of redemption, however, he must first brutalize the woman. In Laurence's text, his conversion is consolidated through her silent forgiveness of his brutality and his subsequent tears. Margaret Gail Osachoff concludes that "the forgiveness of the woman, and by implication of the dark continent, is somewhat sentimental and unbelievable" (224). I would argue that the silent acts of forgiveness and repentance are not sentimental, but extremely disturbing, since brutality is in effect washed away by tears.

The girl's rape and its outcome are just part of Laurence's commentary in *This Side Jordan* on gender conflicts, illustrated in part through Johnnie's involvement with white as well as black women. His interactions with white women have unsettling parallels to his sacrifice of the black virgin. Three times in the novel blood pours from the genitals of a woman who has been sacrificed to provide some form of self-knowledge for Johnnie, and that woman's pain or fear is represented through his eyes as evidence of her animal nature. In the first scene, designed to show some motivation for the brutality of Johnnie's sexuality (and of his nature in general), the reader learns that he watched his mother die from a botched abortion; her cries sound to him like "animal paingrunting" (60). The second incident with the young excised woman is the climax of his imperialistic behaviour and the beginning of his conversion. In the third scene, at the end of the novel, Johnnie watches the birth of his and Miranda's daughter. For a father to be present at a birth set in 1957 would have been unusual, but Laurence invents this scene so that Johnnie can witness blood coming from the genitals of a woman in the act of creation of life, rather than in death or in rape. Still, as the narrator notes of Miranda, again through Johnnie's perspective, "She was no longer human. The voice that came from her throat was an animal's coarse voice" (266). The birth of his child provides his final release, and thus three animalistic women in pain serve as stages in the rehabilitation of this one male character. The scene also provides a symmetry to the closure of the novel, since Aya gives birth to a child in the same hospital after yielding to Nathaniel's insistent demands. Laurence's desire for parallelism leads her to represent the two births through the men's eyes, a choice for which she later berated herself. As she wrote in *Dance On the Earth*, "How could I have been so stupid, so self-doubting? . . . I, who had experienced such joy with sex, such anguish and joy in the birth of my children, not only didn't have the courage to describe these crucial experiences; it didn't even occur to me to do so" (5-6).

In her African books, Laurence steps back from the feminist critique evident in her later novels and in *Dance On the Earth*. Her anti-imperialist statements are also compromised by her imperialist discursive inheritance. Nevertheless, she attempts the difficult task of representing the cultural specifics of the colonies and former colonies she visited, including their indigenous and imported patriarchal oppressions. Her writings about female genital mutilation and child prostitution, and her recognition of some of the other intersections of patriarchy and colonialism, help to illu-

minate the relations of power in the countries about which she writes. Laurence thus begins, in her African fiction and in her travel narrative, to forge an anti-imperialism that is compatible with feminism in its investigation of colonial lives, relationships, and social structures.

#### NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank the anonymous readers for *Canadian Literature*, especially for the suggestion that I examine Warne's book for details about McClung as a model for Laurence. Many thanks also to Brian Trehearne and Nathalie Cooke of McGill University, who read and commented on earlier versions of this paper.
- 2 Alcoff responds to critics such as Chandra Mohanty who argue that intervention by Western feminists may further the oppression of women. She also investigates Gayatri Spivak's dissenting conclusion that because "The subaltern cannot speak," the female intellectual "has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (104). For an examination of the notion of speaking for others in relation to Laurence's story "The Drummer of All The World," see Collu.
- 3 The epigraph and original title of *The Prophet's Camel Bell* are taken from James's Elroy Flecker's "The Gates of Damascus": "God be thy guide from camp to camp, / God be thy shade from well to well. / God grant beneath the desert stars / Thou hearest the Prophet's camel bell." When Knopf published the book in the United States in 1964, its editors chose a less obscure and less evocative title, *New Wind in a Dry Land*. Laurence's autobiographical account of her life and the lives of those around her in Somalia is based on a journal she kept while in Somalia and subsequently destroyed, and borrows from the introduction to her earlier translation of Somali poetry and stories.
- 4 The paternalism of British administrators is evident in their proposal to build water reservoirs that the Somalis doubted would be useful (*Prophet's Camel Bell* 44). Laurence's examination of prostitution and her rewriting of the trope of woman as territory will be examined later in this paper.
- 5 Both postcolonial and feminist approaches investigate relations of power and, used together, should allow for a better understanding of the multiple and pervasive intersections between patriarchy and imperialism. Male postcolonial writers, however, have often shown patriarchal biases, in part through their lack of attention to issues relevant to women's lives. Frantz Fanon writes compellingly about the nature of colonization and the course of the struggle toward decolonization, but his focus is almost exclusively on men's responses, and when he uses apparently neutral terms such as "the native," he almost always refers to men alone (*Wretched of the Earth* 92; for a discussion of Fanon's gendered terminology see McClintock 362). Homi Bhabha, in his foreword to the 1986 edition of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, perpetuates Fanon's dismissal of women by failing to consider their experience (123). Although Edward Said acknowledges that Orientalism "encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world" (207), his theories about colonizers rarely mention women. Chinua Achebe does not ignore women as discursive colonizers but instead mounts a concerted attack on them, denigrating one Western critic of African literature in terms of her gender by describing her as "only a housewife" (6). An exception to Achebe's critical stance is his

assessment of Laurence, whom he lauds for her comment in *Long Drums and Cannons* that African history is “neither idyllic, as the views of some nationalists would have had it, nor barbaric, as the missionaries and European administrators wished and needed to believe” (Achebe 12; Laurence 9).

Another tension between postcolonialism and feminism is evident in criticism of the inherent cultural biases of Western feminists who write about colonialism and imperialism. Mohanty, for example, argues that “feminist scholarly practices exist within relations of power” that can in fact perpetuate the colonization of women, especially if such practices present what she calls “a composite, singular ‘third world woman’” (197). She argues that what are needed instead are “local, contextual analyses” that avoid “homogenisation of class, race, religious and daily material practices of women in the third world” (210-11).

- 6 In “Books That Mattered to Me,” Laurence indicates that she read *Prospero and Caliban* after *This Side Jordan* was published in 1960 (244). If Laurence’s dating is accurate, David Richards and Jane Leney, who argue for the influence of Mannoni on *This Side Jordan*, are mistaken.
- 7 For a contrasting portrayal of African characters, see Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*. Mary Rimmer suggests that although Laurence was indeed “making wild guesses about her characters’ language and speech,” she chose “to make speech and dialogue central elements” in order to enact “personal and cultural power struggles, particularly for low-status speakers” (4). African writer Micere Githae-Mugo defends Laurence against charges of appropriation of voice, arguing that, unlike many Western writers on Africa, Laurence never claimed to “understand the *native* mind” and yet has “a reasonable grasp of what Africa is all about” (13). Sparrow, meanwhile, comments on “how well [Laurence] interpreted the strangeness of foreign lands and unfamiliar customs” (13).
- 8 Githae-Mugo stresses the cultural sensitivity of *A Tree for Poverty* (12), while Donez Xiques quotes the cautious praise of B. W. Andrzejewski, who helped Laurence work on the poems in Somalia and who later provided his own more detailed translations. Andrzejewski suggests that “in spite of the language barrier she developed such empathy with the Somalis that although her translations are sometimes not very close to the original she conveyed their spirit and atmosphere with a high degree of accuracy” (Xiques 12). Richards provides a more critical assessment of the translations; he argues that *A Tree for Poverty* is “so accessible to a non-Somali reader” as a result of Laurence’s tendency to universalize and thus ignore the specific characteristics of Somali culture, and that the poems appear to have been chosen using “western literary criteria” (28). Richards also criticizes Laurence’s “appeal to a fundamental, transcultural humanity” in *Long Drums and Cannons* (28).
- 9 Laurence was so convinced of the accuracy of Mannoni’s dependency theory that she used it as the basis for her story “The Voices of Adamo” (“Books That Mattered to Me” 244).
- 10 As it is commonly practised in Somalia, the procedure consists not of circumcision or simple removal of the prepuce of the clitoris, but instead excision or amputation of most of the external female genitalia, including the clitoris, labia minora, and inner part of the labia majora. Excision is followed by infibulation, or tightly sewing together the resulting wound, leaving only a small opening for the exit of urine and menstrual fluid. The procedure is normally done at age eight or younger (Hicks 58) and, as Joyce Stoller indicates in her review of Somali film-maker Soraya Mire’s *Fire Eyes*, results in a “chastity belt” made of the girl’s “own flesh” (58). Motivations for the practice include its perceived role in protecting virginity, assuring paternity, focusing women on their tasks as mothers, and making polygynous marriages workable.

- 11 Other researchers have recognized Laurence's commitment to a discussion of women's lives in Somalia. Barbara Pell argues, for example, that "The themes of human suffering and colonial oppression particularly converged, for Laurence, in her shock at the plight of women in Somali society despite their elaborate romanticization in literature" (39).
- 12 See Dorkenoo (63, 88, 118) and WHO (11, 17). Laurence's early predecessor in Somalia, Richard Burton, tried to include an appendix on infibulation in his 1856 book. The appendix, in Latin and thus accessible only to those interested in scientific study, was suppressed sometime during the publication process. A 1966 edition of Burton's book includes a translation of two pages of the censored appendix mistakenly included in a first edition. Burton's description is surprisingly detailed and accurate; he writes that removal of the clitoris and cutting away and sewing together of the labia was performed by a woman of the Midgan tribe, and indicates that if a new husband was unable to break through the scar tissue with his penis, he used a finger or a knife—practices confirmed by Koso-Thomas, Dorkenoo, and Hicks.
- 13 African women writers such as Dorkenoo, Koso-Thomas, and El Saadawi have only more recently written about excision, while Mire first filmed it in 1994. In her book written the same year, Dorkenoo emphasizes that "some years ago it would have been impossible in most countries even to mention the subject [of female genital mutilation] in public" (62).
- 14 In Laurence's first draft of the novel, the two protagonists were Miranda and Nathaniel (Laurence and Wiseman 97). Laurence wrote Johnnie into the role of main character after criticism from the *Atlantic Monthly* Novel Contest led her conclude that Johnnie's story paralleled Nathaniel's in a more "natural & inevitable way" (103).
- 15 As early as 1980, Margaret Gail Osachoff commented that the passage exemplified "the rape of Africa by the white imperialist" (224), while Leney criticized the "lack of subtlety" of "the trite symbol of the woman as African continent" (69). In later examinations of the scene, Sparrow and Gabrielle Collu come to Laurence's defence; while Sparrow suggests that "colonialism is condemned by means of a metaphor" (150), Collu argues that "Laurence's use of the imagery is not trite or unsubtle" but instead shows a "revisionist use of the colonial/imperial trope of land-as-woman" (27, 20).
- 16 Leney calls Johnnie's experience an "epiphany" in which he "comes to see the girl as a person, one of the Others who has to be respected" (69), while Pell comments that Johnnie's "recognition of the humanity of the black virgin (who symbolizes Africa) and his kindness to her are the first evidences of *his* humanity and respect for the Other" (40).

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