

The Axiological Turn of Doris Lessing's *Hunger*

Zahra A. Hussein Ali *

ABSTRACT

This study investigates Doris Lessing's treatment of the issues of commodity fetishism and value in *Hunger* (1953). Drawing on concepts postulated by K. Marx, G. Lukács, W. Pietz, and S. Freud, the study argues that Lessing casts the fetish at the intersection of the socio-economic and the psychological. The fetish in this novella designates European white culture and its capitalist economics as well as symbolic hungers that threaten African manhood with economic-political castration. To liberate African anti-colonial consciousness from its inertia, the subaltern subject needs to subvert the allure of the commodity fetish and seek a sound understanding of value and the definition of *homo economicus* [economic human]. Nevertheless, it is carnivalesque attitudes played by female African agents that initiate in the African male a new epistemology, mobilize his life drives, and cultivate a valuable black manhood that thrives beyond the power of the fetish.

Keywords: Doris Lessing; Fetish Literature; Axiology; Anti-Colonialism; Africa.

Introduction

A New Approach to Lessing's *Hunger*

Compared to the critical attention that Lessing's other African works enjoyed, particularly *The Grass is Singing* and *Martha Quest*, *Hunger* (1953)¹ received scant attention, mostly in the form of brief commentaries. Commonly, early critics emphasized two unique features—that despite its length, the narration features only black characters, and the plot reveals the internal as well as the external conflicts of the black central character, Jabavu (Adams, 2008, p. 44; Chennells, 1990, p. 35; Klein, 2000, p. 144; Thorpe, 1978, p. 38). Often approached from the perspective of its origination in Lessing's 1952 trip to Moscow and her conversations with communist Russian literary writers, who championed a literature predicated on clear moral precepts, commentaries on *Hunger* took basically two directions: investigation of its moralistic articulations or/and exploration of its political resonance. The moralistic direction has prompted critics to observe *Hunger's* trajectory within certain literary traditions. John Reed (1986) argues that the novella is "a version of the parable of the prodigal son, the story of the African adolescent who leaves his village... and returns, after degradation and disaster, not to his father, but to the

African political leaders who offer him an alternative to the ruthless, acquisitive individualism" (p. 256). Michael Thorpe (1978) argues that, as in Dickens' art, where characters are drawn along a crystalline binary of good/bad, "Jabavu's initiation into the life of the 'skellums' ('wicked person[s]') in the city" exhibits "strong resemblances to *Oliver Twist*" (p. 37). Critics interested in the political aspects tend to assess the novella's ideological purchase and the way it attenuates the aesthetic dimension. For example, Don Adams (2008) states that "the story has a dissatisfying moralistic and doctrinaire Marxist conclusion in which the healthy future of the collective is posited as the release from present individual misfortune and unhappiness"; and that "the fundamental problem with the story stems from the fact that the central figure is never allowed the existential freedom necessary for fictive characters to become real" (Adams, p. 441). In a similar vein, Thorpe (1978) argues that the novella demonstrates limited literary achievement because it harbors "a disturbingly objective view of character and situation, as of a documentary about a strange people" (p. 37); if it is "one of her 'most liked,'" as Lessing acknowledges, it is "[p]erhaps because there is so much ammunition in the story that may be used against white rule and for African solidarity" and because of "its artistic simplification" (p. 38).

A somewhat different analytical angle is engaged by Anthony Chennells (1990), who has devoted several paragraphs to *Hunger* and has followed a postcolonial,

* Department of English Language and Literature. Faculty of Arts, Kuwait University, Kuwait. Received on 29/10/2015 and Accepted for Publication on 14/2/2015.

black Zimbabwean perspective. Chennells (1990) has argued that Lessing's African works are written within an ideology he designates as "European" and can be called "romantic anti-capitalism" (pp. 26-27). In so writing her African works, "the distinction between [Lessing] and writers who wrote Africa as primitive may not be as valid" as critics posit (Chennells, p. 26). What distinguishes *Hunger* from Lessing's other African works, Chennells points out, is that it "might seem [to] break with" the discourses of romantic anti-capitalism (p. 35). The question, then, is "[h]ow far is 'Hunger' a product of white ideology?" (Chennells, p. 35). Chennells locates *Hunger*, despite its liberal thrust, "within the settler discourse" (p. 36); it leans toward a "paradigm of white superiority and black inferiority" in three separate ways (pp. 17-18). First, Jabavu has "a scepticism [sic] about the values of rural tradition" (Chennells, p. 35) and the novella points to "the absence of progress in the processes of rural life, which the settlers would have used as evidence of a static barbarism, become[s] to Jabavu's father evidence of the presence of ethical codes producing the security of a public morality. Only a non-African would write Africans as part of the natural order as Lessing has done there" (Chennells, p. 36). Second, Jabavu's mother makes remarks on ancient tribal habits, by which "tribes from the south [were] terrorising [sic] those in the north" (Chennells, p. 36); this recalls to the Zimbabwean reader's mind "the Ndebele raids on the Shona, which were an important element in colonial historiography" (Chennells, p. 36). Third, and most significantly, "Jabavu's yearning for the consumer products of the West and Jabavu politicised into part of a modern revolutionary consciousness are productions of the dialectical process colonialism set in motion" (Chennells, p. 38). Put differently, "[i]t is the pre-colonial past not colonialism which the story writes as irrelevant" (Chennells, p. 38); the pre-colonial past is associated with the primitive. However, Chennells' view did not go unchallenged. Jane Hotchkiss convincingly demonstrates that "many occasions of 'romantic primitivism' in [Lessing's early African] work[s] are deliberately ironic" (p. 82).

This study inserts itself into the discussion of *Hunger* by broadening what has, to this point, been a narrow focus that makes no attempt at a detailed exploration of the range of significant elements at play in *Hunger*. In this regard, the study seeks to re-frame the novella's discourse around issues of axiology not only because of its complex themes concerning ethics and politics, but

because issues concerning value and value judgments are still vitally relevant to our cultural moment. In exploring the novella's axiological articulations, the study investigates, in particular, the workings of the commodity fetish in relation to the concepts of value and *homo economicus* (economic human). Value should be understood in a broad sense which encompasses ethics as well as economics; the term betokens that which is good, worthy, and ought to be desired, be it intrinsic or instrumental in nature.

Given this perspective, this study maintains that *Hunger* is a novel about cultural conversions as they pertain to the concept of value, or more specifically, the valuable; in this work, Lessing weaves a relationship between the subversion of the modern/colonial commodity fetish, the instigation of anti-colonial political activism, and the mobilization of life drives in the novella's paradigmatic central character. To forge the crucial links between these three thematic elements, Lessing casts the commodity fetish at the intersection of the socio-economic and the psychological. Before substantiating this argument, it would be useful at this point to give a synoptic account of the novella's main events.

Hunger's Narrative Line

The central character, Jabavu, is a rebellious adolescent, who covets the ways of the white man's world and its commodities. In his attempt to recast his tedious life, he leaves the native *kraal* (hut village) for the city (which resembles Salisbury in the former South Rhodesia). On his way, he meets the leftist black activist, Mr. Samu, who explains to him the evils of colonialism and gives him the address of another activist, Mr. Mizi, so that Jabavu can seek his help upon reaching the city. There, Jabavu meets the erotic Betty, and soon he is integrated into a gang; together with its leader, Jerry, they pursue several thieving escapades. Mrs. Kambusi, who runs a shebeen (an unlicensed drinking establishment) and rents one of her house rooms to Betty, warns Jabavu of the pitfalls of his wild life. One day, after a speech rally, Mizi invites Jabavu to his house and, together with other activists, they talk about the liberation of Africans from colonial oppression. Nevertheless, Jabavu does not quit his thieving and drinking life and soon his relationship with Betty and Jerry becomes full of conflict. In a fit of anger, Jerry kills Betty, but he convinces the gang members that Jabavu carried out the act. At one

point, under the threat of the knife, Jerry forces Jabavu to accompany him to rob Mizi's house. However, Jabavu's moral sense awakens and he begins to scream to alert the Mizis. Jerry, however, is quick and, while escaping from the window, leaves his knife in Jabavu's hand. In prison, the remorseful Jabavu is visited by Mr. Tennent, an inept white preacher, who gives him a letter from Mizi. Much moved by Mizi's discourse, a new outlook on life dawns in Jabavu's mind.

Given its narrative line, the novella's socio-econopolitical vision is filtered through the black characters' attitudes toward the white man's commodities. Moreover, within the unfolding of the narrative's textual surface, sundry motifs and themes arise and conjoin into, metaphorically, plexus. This plexus takes up a central issue - the initiation of a new epistemology in young black manhood.

A General Theoretical Note on Commodity Fetishism

The study's analysis of the commodity fetish and value is anchored electively in several theoretical formulations - K. Marx (1887), S. Freud (1961), G. Lukács (1999), and W. Pietz (1985). Because the concept of the fetish is so broad that it is beyond encapsulation in a single theory, my analytical scope will be based on contextuality as well as particularity.² While in Marx commodity fetishism obfuscates the social relations of production, the term as used in this study indicates an amalgam of two elements: an obsession with beautiful objects/commodities as if they exist per se and a narcissistic masquerading as if the human self possesses total independence from the socially relational as well as all socio-political commitments. Moreover, for the purposes of this study, the term "the commodity fetish" denotes a much coveted object whose nature is a commodity that belongs to social echelons higher than that of the desiring subject/character. The study's definitions necessitate the occasional re-instrumentation of certain conceptualizations of the fetish from specific disciplines to support its literary analysis. It is well to remember William Pietz's statement about "the capacity of the material object [as well as the fetish] to embody - simultaneously and sequentially- religious, commercial, aesthetic, and sexual values" (p. 7).

Structure of The Study: Axiological Mapping

In *Hunger*, axiology and the commodity fetish oppose each other; the grounds of this opposition are

psychological, politico-epistemological, and economic. Put differently, the fetish provides an angle through which the concept of value (in its most capacious sense) disclose an important matrix; this matrix is praxes that renounce the fetishization of the commodities of the white colonial world in order to shore up the axiological rehabilitation of African manhood.

Besides a thematic overview, the study's exploration of the novella's axiological turn is divided into three major sections, each addressing a particular facet. The first section analyzes the workings of the commodity fetish and the subject's formation of value from a psycho-ethical perspective. The second section explores the politico-epistemological dangers of the commodity fetish vis-à-vis the subaltern's cognitive acts. The third section investigates how Lessing's axiological approach partakes of the Enlightenment's tradition and, consequently, foregrounds the imperative of cultivating a rational mind that understands value from an ethico-economic perspective. Taken together, the three facets demonstrate the novella's capacious axiological import and dramatize the subaltern's entering (with ease) and existing (with difficulty) the malevolent labyrinthine web of the commodity fetish. The study concludes with reflections on how Lessing's critique of the commodity fetish seems to attach itself to a bridled feminism, on the one hand, and a notion of ameliorative patriarchy, on the other.

Overview: Black Manhood and Troubling Worldly Desires

Hunger dramatizes a crisis in the relationship of young African manhood with anti-colonial activism; implicitly, however, it explores the dangers that beset black manhood when violated by the banality of the commodity fetish and an aberrant axiology encapsulated in the chiding words of Jabavu's mother to her son: "what white man's devil has got into you!" (p. 441). Estranged from his local parochial culture, emotionally and sexually within the thralls of destructive temptations—gangster girls and appropriated commodity luxuries—Jabavu experiences signify what I call "epistemological beleaguerment." His journey from the *kraal* to the "beautiful... city of the white man" (p. 436) represents immersion into an amorality that casts civic agency adrift, and his thought processes become characterized by an atomistic conception of interest and a reductionist simplification of reality. The title of the novella denotes myriad desires—economic, socio-political, and bodily

physical; however, in its abstract sense, desire is enmeshed in a semantic web that indicates a primal fount for the production of pathological actions as well as meaningful actions. The multi-layered hunger in the narrative puts the workings of both types of actions in a contrapuntal motion. In the ensuing sections, the study will engage in a closer consideration of this generalization. However, instead of moving from theoretical exposition to textual analysis, it will combine these two strands.

Value Formation: a Psycho-Ethical Perspective

It is in the impoverished *kraal*, in the very first scene, that the gestation of the commodity fetish begins; the fetish, thus, is associated with discontent, with the deadlock of the socio-economic climate of rural spaces, and with the escapist desire for whiteness. Refusing to join his father and brother in tilling the unfertile field, Jabavu, instead, bathes holding in his hand “the white man’s soap” (p. 410) with momentary content, thinking that “Jabavu is like a white man, who washes when he leaves his sleep” (p. 410). Ironically, the fetishized soap takes him to a less civilized stage symbolized by his standing naked under the tree outside his house. Jabavu does not think that white men do not bathe naked in front of passing women pedestrians. Therefore, in the mind of Jabavu, owning the commodity fetish and questions of respectability are mixed up with one another. More dangerously, however, under the spell of fetishized commodities, Jabavu seeks to transform himself into, borrowing and reversing a phrase from Norman Mailer, a negro white whose consumerist habits are the index to his imagined hybridized cultural-racial identity. Significantly, when he is given a pair of discarded shorts that once belonged to the ten years old son of the Greek store owner, he patches them with “fibre [sic] stripped from under the bark of a tree” (p. 411) and wears them instead of the “loincloth which is the garb of a kraal-boy” (p. 410). It is this negro white identity, Jabavu presumes, that will offer him security and the hope of emancipation.

Having constructed such an ardent attitude towards the commodity object, the confidant Jabavu tries to elicit admiration and the commodity fetish instigates a new hunger—a hunger for exhibitionism. Not surprisingly, Jabavu’s songs of the self are immersed in gender performance on a purely erotic level. In these songs, he “has filled a woman of the town with his strength” (p. 454) and, he “is stronger than the women of the town” (p.

454). Needless to point out that such songs would not be sanctioned by the *kraal* conservative culture. Given this context, the conflict between Jabavu and his parents at the outset of the novel is simultaneously a conflict within him, indicating a cheapening of *kraal* culture and dismissal of its customs as any kind of asset to exorbitant manhood. To measure indigenous culture in these terms prompts a journey to the city of the white man, where upon arrival and the theft of a “fine yellow shirt” (p. 444) and a pair of “new” gray trousers (p. 444), Jabavu feels entitled to projects his treasured sexuality onto its ghettoscapes. Clad in these fetishized clothes, he “stares at everything, particularly the girls” (p. 444). When he is scrutinized by Betty’s erotic gaze, he immediately reciprocates because her dress “is bright yellow with big red flowers on it... [she] has smart green shoes on her feet and wears a crocheted cap of pink wool, and she carries a handbag like a white woman” (p. 444).

To understand Jabavu’s mindset, the remarks of William Pietz (1985) about the fetish are helpful. Taking a historical perspective that begins with the encounter between missionary Europeans and African tribes in the sixteenth century, Pietz (1985) explains that the history of the fetish indicates that “the fetish could originate only in conjunction with the emergent articulation of the ideology of the commodity form that defined itself within and against the social values and religious ideologies of two radically different types of noncapitalist [i.e., pre-modern European and African tribal] society, as they encountered each other in an ongoing cross-cultural situation” (p. 7). Pietz (1985) concludes that the “fetish, then, not only originated from, but remains specific to, the problematic of the social value of material objects as revealed in situations formed by the encounter of radically heterogeneous social systems” (p. 7). It is for this reason that European commodities provide Jabavu with a sense of unity with the white race; through the possession of the commodity fetish, he fantasizes, dialogue and proximity are established and racial borders would work themselves out. In a dream, Jabavu “sees himself in one of the big streets [of the city] where the big houses are. A white man stops him and says: I like you, I wish to help you. Come to my house. I have a fine room... you may live in it. I will give you money when you need it” (p. 468).

The narrative projects a strikingly narrow image of the city; nevertheless, this image is bifocal: the city is a market for the fetishized commodities and it is an

immoral ghetto within the white affluent urban area. Moreover, the novella's ghettoscape is predicated on gender stereotypes: whereas Jerry is the thug/matsotsi, Betty is the gangster whore. In the city, where it is available abundantly, the fetishistic object marks borders in the characters' consciousness. Goods and money exchange not only restricts human relationship, but also abrogates its possibility. Although Jabavu in the beginning feels that to possess the commodity fetish is to cross the racial/class divides, the city reinforces Jabavu's marginality and his outsider status as a "Kraal nigger" (p. 510) as he is called by Jerry, the matsotsi.

In the city, it becomes clear that not only the love of the fetishized commodity object is a form of moral decadence and a sign of cultural schizophrenia but also a sort of epistemological pathology. The perverse and harmful aspect of the fetish in *Hunger* resides in the fact that while Africans are struggling, and while many have embarked on the national cause of liberation, Jabavu, who is extremely intelligent, is fixated on seeking the banal gratification of stolen quotidian commodities: tablecloths, clocks, ashtrays, spoons and forks, and handbags (pp. 486-87). Another perverse consequence of his fetishistic inclinations is his lack of empathetic insight. While on the road to the city, Jabavu comes across the cruel facts about the buying and selling of labor, i.e., his encounters with the black recruiters and the sight of miserable laborers in lorries; nevertheless, these facts do not effect in him a higher modality of interpretive competence of colonial brutal realities. Ironically, Jabavu's daily gazing on a sordid quarter called "Poland- Johannesburg," which he considers "an evil-looking place where there are many tall brick shelters crowded together in rows, and shacks made of petrol tins beaten flat, or sacks and boxes" (p. 450) precludes curiosity and the widening of the parameters of his political consciousness. In addition, the exclusionary nature of the fetish makes inherent another irony: although the love of the commodity object inadvertently prevents Jabavu from becoming a docile black body working in the mines of Johannesburg, the delusive signifying power of the fetishized commodity is an impediment that hinders his socio-political integration into the group of enlightened Africans. It is important to note that when first meeting the kind activist Mr. Samu and his companions, the frightened lonely Jabavu, in his "torn trousers" implores "My brothers, I am hungry" (p. 431). Yet, later, when he sets his eyes on the suitcase of

the sleeping Mr. Samu whose "metal clasp glints and glimmers in the flickering red glow" of the camp's fire (p. 435) it "dazzles" him and "his whole being [is] clamorous with desire for the suitcase" (p. 436). The passage extends a particular understanding of the dangers of the fetishized commodity —it empties male-bonding out of its potential for anti-colonial solidarity. Consequently, under the power of the fetish, the gaze does not work cognitively and the fetish is, by and large, a mediating tool of the political castration of the colonized subject.

The Politico-Epistemological Perils of the Commodity Fetish

Obviously, *Hunger* is informed by a left-leaning ideology (De Mul, 2009; Gindin, 2003; Klein, 2000; Watkins, 2007) ³ that projects Jabavu's experience as paradigmatic of the crisis of the common figure of the vulnerable young male subaltern which mirrors allegorically the political journey of an emergent nation towards formation and independence. The identity building of this iconic male, the novella suggests, should be guided by an ethos that emphasizes a double departure: one from the decadent economic choices that are popular in indigenous African culture, for example to "work as a cook or a houseboy or office boy" (p. 475), and another from the modalities of a Western colonial culture that while it denies his humanity goads him to mindless consumption. The commodity fetish is detrimental because whereas it creates pleasant illusions and facilitates the veiling of existential anxieties, it eliminates a coherent, rationally analytical apparatus of perception. The fetish, Mark Johnston (2011) argues, "perpetuates the fantasy by occluding and standing in for the Real" (p. 10). As Emily Apter (1991) explains, the fetish involves a visual dimension (pp. xii-xiii); Jabavu refuses to look at the econopolitical-racial hell in which he and his people live, engaging, instead, in the "repression of the scopical drive" (p. xiii). Though Apter's term is related to psychology, one can cast the dichotomy of fetishist/voyeur in political terms and agree with her that one should "soften the rigid distinction between fetishist and voyeur [in its capacious sense] by saying that the fetishist does indeed refuse to look, but in refusing to look, he stares" (Apter, 1991, p. xiii). Francis Mulhern (2007), rightly, aligns the fetish with fascination, not curiosity, because while "[c]uriosity is transitive, driven by the desire to pass from knowledge state A to

knowledge state B" fascination is "intransitive" (p. 482); the fetish "attracts the gaze while obstructing the vision" (p. 489).

To frame this statement within the text, during the first phase of their relationship, Jabavu's desirous gaze at Betty is incompatible with critical reasoning; he cannot read the intersemiotic connections of key elements in Betty's life, such as her gaudy clothing, her rude and hyperbolic utterances, her grotesque profligacy, and the ways she objectifies herself as an object of male sexual desire. Despite Kambusi's sardonic remarks, Jabavu cannot fathom how Betty's banal and mindless hedonism does not serve any good presently or in the future. Jabavu does not perceive how such hedonism, if widely popularized, could dismantle a vital vision directed toward the collective good of an emerging subaltern nation.

As discussed above, the crux of the novella's leftist discourse is that since the fetishized commodity closes the possibility of an enlightened epistemology, it perpetuates one's subaltern position. From an obsession with fashionable cloths Jabavu moves to a fascination with another fetish: money, which in Marx's theory, is presented as the ultimate "crystallized" (p. 61) form of the commodity fetish because it is one single commodity object created to reify labor time as well as to set the value/equivalence of all other commodities. That Jabavu considers trivial objects such as "bright and smart clothes" (p. 470) and a handful of shillings as his material capital for black manhood, is indeed dangerously banal. Yet, the banality has to do more with its moral-epistemological implications than its naive economic calculation. Through a Marxist lens, one can establish the dangerously flawed aspect of Jabavu's epistemology. While he steals these commodity objects, he does not think about their "absolute value" (Marx, 1887, p. 348), that behind their availability lays the labor of the underprivileged human producer as well as the general African proletariat class whose exploitation puts the macro economy of the English imperial power in motion and enables it to manufacture these commodities. Jabavu sees only their exchange value in terms of boosting his erotic drives. It is thus that Jabavu alienates himself from the laboring Africans who occupy the same socio-racial strata. Significantly, Jabavu's first song on the road boasts: "I am coming to the city/... /I trust no one, not even my brother. /I am Jabavu, who goes alone" (p. 430). And later, when Jerry pokes him with a knife and orders

that he help him dispose of Betty's corpse, Jabavu's thoughts are "[h]e is cutting my smart coat" (p. 502) and Jabavu does not understand "why he is so stupid as to mind about a coat" (p. 503) when he is caught up in the morass of a crime.

Jabavu's cognitive disorder undermines his political agency as a colonized subject who should participate in the national emancipation movement; the Freudian concept of disavowal can focus this point. As Francis Mulhern puts it, "disavowal" is a "metapsychological concept" (p. 481): it "denotes a mental process in which a given reality is simultaneously acknowledged and denied, avowed but at the same time dis-avowed thanks to the formation of a fetish or something like it that preserves an anterior, less disturbing belief" (p. 481). Though the Freudian concept refers to the sexual fetish, one can apply it to Jabavu's epistemological crisis. While he, on occasions, admires "the men of light" (p. 452) he, nevertheless, refers to them as "fools" (p. 470) and "skellums" (p. 441) who will deprive him of the gratification of the commodity fetish: "[a]ll my life my body has been speaking with the voices of hunger: I want... excitement and clothes, and food... fish and buns... a bicycle and the women of the town.... And if I listen to these clever people [i.e., men of light], straight away my life will be bound to theirs, and it will not be dancing and music and clothes and food, but work, work, work" (p. 434).

Consequently, chief among the dangers of the commodity fetish is that it turns Jabavu into an aimless apolitical picaro who debunks all economic systems. As a picaro roaming the markets and the streets, snatching quotidian objects of white people, his self becomes the extension of the alluring market of cheap goods and the single shilling in his pocket. Even when hungry, and "tempted to spend his shilling on some proper food" (p. 469), he keeps the coin in his pocket "like a little piece of magic" because "he has the feeling that if he loses it he will lose his luck" (p. 469). Moreover, as a picaro in the various quarters on the town - the white affluent neighborhoods, the area of kaffir shops and Indian stores, and the ghettos of the native Town - stealing and risking his life and often coming under the blade of Jerry's knife, Jabavu opens up the boundaries between criminal acts and death drives. Put differently, Jabavu further reverts to a less civilized state where death drives reign.

In Freudian psychoanalytical theories, death drives are tantamount to the rejection of Eros, an abstract and

complex force that is synonymous with the love of life, and consequently, conducive to the promotion of vitality, productive action, growth, and self-preservation. More capacious than the term "libido," which denotes instinctual sexual drives, Eros must be suppressed in the interest of civilization. Freud (1961) writes: "it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means?) of powerful instincts" (p. 44). In a climactic tone, Freud (1961) asserts: "If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization.... Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security" (p. 62). Egotistical, enraptured by dangerous and abject pleasures, and unable to recognize what the genuine love of life is, Jabavu does not direct his energies toward the burgeoning political momentum to participate in an operative anti-colonial movement. It is in this sense that Jabavu's character lacks the ethos of civilization.

Rethinking Agency and Money: An Ethico-Economic Outlook

Lessing in *Hunger* adheres to the Enlightenment's tradition (represented by Hegel, Marx, and Freud) which is "defined by the effort to portray the fetishist's perspective as the opposite or dialectical counterpart of rational, enlightened thought... as a simple, childlike strategy that blinds one to historical and social change" (Kocela, 2010, p. 4). In accordance with this attitude, the narrative posits that the commodity fetish can be controlled, can be deprived of its monolithic presence as a signifier which jeopardizes the reliability and legitimation of our epistemological perspectives. Gesturing toward the Enlightenment's tradition, Lessing seems to follow the idioms of what William Pietz (1985, p. 8) and Christopher Kocela (2010, p. 32) term a "first-encounter theory." Pietz (1985) explains: "[o]ne of the common statements about the nature of the primitive's fetish in texts from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century is what may be called the 'first encounter theory'" (p. 8). It involves "a first encounter between new purposive desire and a material object, whereby the thing becomes the divinized emblem of the project" (Pietz, p. 8). Yet, Lessing is not militaristic in her repudiation of the

commodity object and she, as we shall see, does not demonize it in simplistic ways.⁴ The first encounter hypothesis in *Hunger* functions on a second level: that of the encounter with enlightened mentors who correct Jabavu's fetish-ridden epistemology: Mrs. Kambusi, the carnivalesque guide, and the educated activists Mr. Samu and Mr. Mizi, both firm believers in "the movement of history" (p. 474) and "the development of industry" (p. 475). This is a key point and it deserves further elaboration.

The novella extends, along generational lines, a double vision of money in its dual form of commodity and value. Unlike Jabavu, to Mizi and Kambusi, money is a catalyst not a fetish. In their discourses, the importance of money is refracted through anti-colonial acts that defy the color bar; the two characters seem to believe that it is money beyond fetishization that will initiate a new cultural and political legacy of Africanness and help them as subaltern subjects move counter to prejudiced racial essentializing assumptions. Neither a marker of status nor a way for what Thorstein Veblen (1899) calls "conspicuous leisure" (p. 35), i.e., forms of leisure that are prompted by the social factor of exhibiting one's social status, money to Mizi and Kambusi fulfils its pragmatic role as a vehicle for socio-political mobility. As parents of male offspring bent on studying science, for both of them the new Africa is forged at the intersection of the secular and the professional. It is well to remember that three of Kambusi's sons attend a "Roman school where they will grow educated" (p. 451) and upon graduation "go to England to become doctors and lawyers" (p. 451). In short, to Mizi as well as to Kambusi, money is a vehicle which enables them to bolster the hope of a larger middle class and help the African male live in a polymorphous free Africa. Moreover, to both the new Africa is a finite project and money will determine its finiteness and bring it down to the level of an achievable reality. Nevertheless, while Mizi bears an emphatic testament to the African political will and its reassuring rationalization, Kambusi encapsulates an economic mindset that has successfully confronted the colonial reality and made it yield gainful transformations because, as she tells Jabavu, "I use my head" (p. 453). To delineate the novella's econopolitical vector, analysis of Kambusi's characterization is informative.

Situated in the heart of a ghetto that is created by imperial power, Kambusi, who left the *kraal* as a single

mother with four boys—is not intimidated by the ghetto’s environment and the noxious subterranean world it represents. By understanding the necessity of a remunerative business, she also understands the meaning of invention and business shrewdness. Kambusi is a sort of a universal image of *homo economicus*. This figure, Stanley Tambiah (1990) remarks, bolsters “the notion of economy as a differentiated and separate domain of behavior in which individuals act to maximize returns in a price-forming market situation” (p. 2). As economic woman, she makes the skokiaan with her own professional labor and she runs the shebeen as a model of a well-managed business enterprise that is based on self-help. By making a simple illicit product that replaces a fetishized white man’s commodity—whiskey—in her own domestic space she invents a new measure of competitiveness and self-finance. Kambusi has figured how to make a bourgeois life out of a poor one. Upon their first encounter in her shebeen, she clarifies to Jabavu that her discourse is that of sound calculations and priorities; that she believes in financial accumulation and ascent: “In the village we may enter and greet our brothers, and take hospitality from them by right of blood and kinship. This is not the case here, and every man is a stranger until he has proved himself a friend. And every woman, too” (p. 452).

All these details imply that Kambusi’s life is a tale of the attainment of economic individualism as well as financial security; her success resides in the way she turns the ghetto into an economic/market place where capital is generated and a bourgeois self is constituted. The character of Kambusi coincides in basic ways with that of Robinson Crusoe who is often associated in Marxist criticism with mercantilist man (Novak, 1962, p. 5) but mostly with economic man (Watt, 1959, p. 63; Samson, 1995, p. 145; Schmidgen, 2001, p. 22; Deluna, 2004, p. 74). She lives a solitary life in a house that is detached from other houses as if her house is an insular world all by itself; moreover, sex no longer plays a role in her life. What have absolute primacy are individual self-interest and a rationality that regulates it meticulously. This entails that morality in her world should take the form of practical acts and that the only rule is that morality bolsters the position of the rational, intelligent Africans who do not drink her skokiaan. Discouraging Jabavu from drinking her “wicked and dangerous” drink (p. 456), which contains “mealmeal, sugar, tobacco, methylated spirits, boot polish, and yeast” (p. 456), she explains: “[c]lever people make this poison for fools to drink it (p.

456); that “it is not her fault that there are so many fools” (p. 458).

Yet, although Kambusi’s life is a tale that showcases the idea that self-interest and self empowerment take a central position in all political economies whether that of an emerging nation bent on liberation from colonialism or an existing capitalist/colonial one, and although she can be viewed as a fundamentalist *homo economicus* who insists on the rupture between her economic activities and charitable altruism, this rupture does not discount paternalistic attitudes nor does it discredit a civic morality which takes on the form of secular piety. By secular piety I mean the separation of one’s moral sensibility and devotion to a set of principles from religion as an institutionalized system of dogmas and beliefs. Not that the logic of self-empowerment and the market economy of the ghetto does not make Kambusi view her skokiaan customers in Darwinian terms, but her business grows in tandem with a judicious political consciousness and a covert sense of moral self-rebuke; she tells Jabavu: “my life has been hard, and still is... if I were given the chance to begin again, knowing what I know now, I would not lightly throw away that piece of paper with the name [of the activist Mizi] written on it. It means a great deal... to be a friend of that man” (p. 453).

Like Mizi and the men of light, she is concerned with creating an equitable and profitable world for black manhood. She sells Jabavu food, but she also gives him advice. If her advice to Jabavu takes place as one of exchange, the tacit form of repayment she expects from him is to become a force in de-colonization. Like Mizi, Kambusi sees the reformation of Jabavu as a secular covenant of African manhood with a long-awaited nationalism and liberation. The crux of this covenant is the denunciation of the commodity fetish and the endorsement of profitable honest work. As Jabavu guesses “there is a hardness in her [Kambusi], and yet the hardness is not meant as cruelty against him” (p. 452). To recapitulate, although Kambusi is the capitalist mind, and Mizi is akin to the moderate socialist mind, they both de-fetishize money in order to set in motion a cohering force that emphasizes the “we” among Africans. Because both economic views do not eschew bourgeois ideology and the idea of profitability, and because both see paternalism as a commendable component of economic orders, they diminish the validity of the radicalism of capitalist as well as socialist economic views.

The image of Kambusi is integrated into a typology of

femininity that permeates the narrative text throughout; it is Mrs. Mizi who embodies an idealized version of modern African femininity. Except for Betty, who is not only the opposite of the domesticated woman but also the subject who totally lacks a political consciousness, the women in the novel possess critical minds. Even the mother, although a simple villager, is portrayed as possessing a discerning mind surpassing in its epistemological aptitude that of the father. Her attitude toward the past and her understanding of hunger as a historical/ecological event as well as a psychological urge/condition deviates from the villagers' simplistic convictions. She argues that the present is better than the past; that some indigenous habits/customs must be buried for ever because their suitability is no longer tenable. However, it is Mrs. Kambusi and Mrs. Mizi who, as motherly and witty intermediaries, correct Jabavu's blind faith in things that belong to the world of the white man and veer him toward rationality, and a cultural hybridity that conjoins the best of white and the best of black cultures. In this, they succeed more than the male activists do. They are valued not in light of their sexual or domestic roles, but by their political roles as instigators of a heightened male political consciousness. But this is not to suggest that they are gendered in exact similar ways and that they adhere to exact similar codes. After all, Mrs. Mizi studied at the "Mission School of the Romans" (p. 478) and Mrs. Kambusi runs "the most profitable shebeen in the city for many years" (p. 451). Not only does Mrs. Kambusi project a complex view of the concept of value but she embodies a version of womanhood that competes with that of manhood.

Conclusion: the Axiology of Ameliorative Patriarchy

Analysis in the preceding section indicates that Lessing takes a feminist, although low-key, position on her characters. Jabavu's is a phallogentric mind, seeking a status within cultural parameters demarcated by male desire and male charisma. In similar ways, the women concern themselves with the power of African phallogentricity and seem to encourage it; yet by having a role, although auxiliary, they point to the dependability as well as the limitations of its power. Through them, the genealogy and the continuity of a cultural heritage do not stray. So, while contrast is the basis of two models of patriarchy, comparison and continuity regulate the generalized image of matriarchy. There seems to flow a moral dynamic between each of the three women who appear as three successive mothers to Jabavu—i.e., his

nameless biological mother, Mrs. Kambusi, and Mrs. Mizi. These three characters are really not opposites, for they all have progressive minds and wish to displace certain aspects of the patriarchal mode of cognition and to bring it closer to intuition and compassion.

Given this narrative strategy, the critique of the commodity fetish works parallel with the idea of a new patriarchy. At the core of the narrative is an inquiry into an active/redemptive patriarchal model. Two patriarchal models are juxtaposed: that of Jabavu's biological nameless father, who tills the infertile land with his pre-modern hoe exhibiting a fatalistic mindset, and that of Mr. Mizi, who appears as a surrogate father, articulate, well-versed in the legal system, and successfully running a small business. In its description of the political leader's traits, the narrative revises the old model of the *kraal*/agrarian patriarchy and privileges, instead, an urban/bourgeois version of it. It seems appropriate to infer that Mizi's character signifies an ameliorative patriarchy. Educated, progressive, and aware of its socio-political duties, ameliorative patriarchy both rearticulates the parent-child relationship and offers an attainable vision of a future in which a young and empowered national subject assumes an active role in the anti-colonial struggle. Although this patriarchy preserves the grim collective memory of colonial history, it enacts a cross-cultural synthesis that strengthens the political imaginary of a free and modern African nation. Cast in these terms, it could be argued that Mizi's new form of patriarchy promotes two key ideas: the political profitability of one's behavior and the possibility of liberation from colonial rule if the action of the subaltern is predicated on a total new regimentation of thought.

The image of Mizi as ameliorative patriarchy is connected to his image of the resilient economic man; Samu tells an assembled group of activists: "Mr. Mizi... is an example to all who wish to lead the African people to a better life. He was once a messenger at the Office of the Native Commissioner, and even an interpreter, and so... earned a good salary. Yet, because he was forbidden, as employee of the Government, to talk at meetings or even be a member of the League [for the Advancement of the African People], he saved his money, which took him many years, until he had enough to buy a little store in the Township, and so he left his employment and became independent" (pp. 476-77). The role of an ameliorative patriarchy, notwithstanding, the narrative relies on matriarchy to save black manhood from its fetish-ridden

morbid state. Significantly, in his letter to the imprisoned Jabavu, Mizi confesses: "I am writing only because Mrs. Mizi persuaded me to write... Mrs. Mizi tells me I think too much from the head and too little from the heart" (p. 517).

Taken together, Mrs. Kambusi and Mr. Mizi, who both have rid themselves of disorientations, herald the opportunity of success. This success is predicated on correcting the ultimate moral lapse that the commodity fetish involves, what Georg Lukács (1999) calls "reification" (p. 83). Taking Marx's theory of the commodity as a departure point, Lukács formulated in *History and Class Consciousness* the concept of "reification." The concept points to detrimental sociological effects of the type of modernity that capitalism brings about. According to Lukács, in capitalism, social relations appear not as interpersonal connections but as things; social interaction, therefore, takes on the modality of trade and commerce. Since human relations are taken out of their primary and authentic context and cast into a purely economic frame, social relationships are conceived as relationship between traded objects. Lukács writes that the "basis [of commodity structure in capitalism] is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people" (p. 83). Given this condition, Lukács (1999) explains, "[r]eification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange.... [M]odern capitalism tend[s] to replace 'natural' relations which exhibit human relations more plainly by rationally reified relations" (p. 91).

Albeit, reification configures also in non-capitalist economic desires that are structured by the sovereignty of commodity fetishism as defined in this study. Disguised as "respectable vegetable sellers" (p. 486), Jerry and Jabavu in their activity of stealing quotidian commodities and selling them in the ghettoized markets of "kaffirs" and people of color (p. 485) initiate what can be described as mercantilist roguery, which is a total departure from the idea of homo economicus. As a mock economic order, it is not only instable, amorphous, void of economic metrics, capital accumulation as well as surplus value in the sense of monetary profit as well as sociopolitical empowerment, it also causes a pathology wherein the human self is absorbed within the circulation of stolen commodities in underground markets. By allowing himself to be coerced by Jerry and to become a

resource of circulating cheap stolen goods, Jabavu almost sells out himself to a gangster.

One can say that, in essence, Kambusi's and Mr. Mizi's approach to economics and exchange, though with a Marxist thrust, takes on the form of bourgeois thought. Consequently, *Hunger* shuns naive and sentimental notions of economic martyrdom. Since both Mizi and Kambusi seem to acknowledge the role of the petit bourgeois and not just the proletariat, the novella suggests that the radical discrediting of immediate personal interests is fallacious thought because these interests do dovetail with the larger interests of the community; to profit is at the heart of the African liberation movement.

The criticism of both Kambusi and Mizi, as well as experiencing incarceration in prison, where the commodity fetish is totally banished, rehabilitates African manhood. It is in the prison that Jabavu gains an enlightened moral standing whose prospect he was denied during the months he was allured by fetishized objects. Furthermore, it is in prison that he realizes that possessing commodities is not commensurate with a true destination. The prison cell, as opposed to the abandoned warehouse where Jerry's gang lived, signals a rite of passage; it is, moreover, an epistemological threshold that ushers him into a total identification with the African activists who rally around the men of light and steer him toward a proper education that will take his manhood beyond the nullifying power of the commodity fetish.

To conclude, Doris Lessing in *Hunger* pits fetish-violated manhood against an African fraternity. Although the novella is underpinned by a leftist vision, the work is not doctrinaire communism because its socio-political vision is multifaceted gesturing toward paternalistic capitalism and because the character of Kambusi projects the profile of a new capitalist type of African carnivalesque. Given that the story's closing affirms the continuities in experience between Jabavu, Mizi, and Kambusi, black manhood will eventually learn reliable calculations that, on the one hand, endorse the idea of the homo economicus and, on the other, revoke the magical appeal of the conquering commodities of white colonial power; it is thus that black manhood stands as an ineradicable force.

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NOTES

- (1) All direct quotations from the novella given in this study are identified by page numbers referring to Hunger, 1965.
- (2) For an analysis of the etymology of “fetish” and its development as a term, see Christopher Kocela’s (2010, pp. 31-59) book chapter “A Parallax History of Fetish Theory.”
- (3) On Lessing’s Leftist political activism, Carole Klein (2000) in her biographical book writes that “[o]ne of Lessing’s comrades in the Communist Party, also a writer, who did see her as quite political, believes that the central element for her involvement with the Party was that ‘to their credit it was absolutely foremost in fighting imperialist policy and apartheid. They weren’t alone,’ this colleague acknowledges. ‘The left of the Labour Party and Christian groups and so on were also battling these issues. But the Communist Party really was the only party that was four square behind the issue of colonial liberation.’ But committed though she was to fighting colonialist policy, Lessing engaged in Communist activities primarily as a writer (p. 142)... Doris Lessing’s future love, Clancy Sigal would see her eventual

- (4) This is in line with Lukacs’s (1999) theory which does not denounce the idea of commodity altogether; Lukacs writes: “Commodity exchange as the corresponding subjective and objective commodity relations existed, as we know, when society was still very primitive. What is at issue here, however, is the question: how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the total outer and inner life of society? Thus the extent to which such exchange is the dominant form of metabolic change in a society cannot simply be treated in quantitative terms - as would harmonise with the modern modes of thought already eroded by the reifying effects of the dominant commodity form. The distinction between a society where this form is dominant, permeating every expression of life, and a society where it only makes an episodic appearance is essentially one of quality (p. 84)... And this development of the commodity to the point where it becomes the dominant form in society did not take place until the advent of modern capitalism” (86; original italics).

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المنحى القيمي في رواية دوريس لسنج الجوع

زهرة علي*

ملخص

تتقصى هذه الدراسة موضوع تناول دوريس لسنج إشكاليات فتيشية السلعة (أي التعلق الهوسي بها) وعلاقة ذلك بالقيم في رواية الجوع. وتتخذ الدراسة منطلقاً نظرياً مفاهيم كارل ماركس وجورج لوكاش ووليام بيتز وفرويد حول التعلق بالسلعة. تذهب الدراسة إلى أن لسنج تموضع الهوس بالسلعة الاستهلاكية (وكأنما هي شيء يحمل سحرية خارقة) في فضاء يقع بين العامل السوسيو-اقتصادي والعامل النفسي. ودلالياً، تعادل السلعة الموسومة بالسحرية في رواية لسنج الثقافة الأوروبية المرتبطة بالعرق الأبيض والاقتصاد الرأسمالي، وتعني كذلك الجوع بمعناه الرمزي. وتنبدى أشكال الجوع في الرواية كعناصر تهدد الرجولة الأفريقية باللافعالية واللاجدوى، من هنا يتجلى الجوع في الرواية صورة رمزية للإخصاء الاقتصادي-السياسي. ولتحرير الوعي الأفريقي المناهض للاستعمار من خموله، فإن على الذات التي تعاني التبعية أن تقوض غوايات السلعة الاستهلاكية وأن تنشأ فهماً حقيقياً للقيمة ولمفهوم الانسان الاقتصادي. وعلى الرغم من هذا الطرح في خطاب الرواية، فإن العامل الذي يرشد ذات الرجل الأفريقي إلى مقاربة جديدة للواقع، ويولد فيه حراكاً حيوياً، ويغرس فيه رجولة أفريقية قيمة فاعلة، قادرة على تجاوز غوايات السلعة الاستهلاكية، هذا العامل هو الممارسات الكرنفالية (حسب مفهوم باختين) التي تتجلى في ذات المرأة الأفريقية.

الكلمات الدالة: دوريس لسنج، الأدب الوثني، علم القيم، مناهض للاستعمار، أفريقيا.

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