

CHAPTER 8

CONTENT AND CHARACTER IN THE RHODESIAN WHITE NOVEL—

SOME RHODESIAN WOMEN NOVELISTS

Introduction

Nancy Patridge's books were discussed in the last chapter because her stories fit well into the theme of African Nationalism and the Second Chimurenga. In this chapter, focus will be on a selection of other Rhodesian women's writing with special attention being paid to the role of women in the colonisation of Zimbabwe.

There is a good summary of these concerns in Madeline Heald's preface to her book where she writes, "In this book there are stories of great privations, the awful loneliness of living in the bush, of love and laughter, of the excitement of adventure and, at all times a sterling endeavour to make a new life in a country only just emerging from its birth pangs."¹

Earlier on, Heald quotes from *The Real Rhodesia*, a 1923 book by Mrs. E. Tawse Jollie, who writes:

The true story of Rhodesia is contained in the records of her settlers, their struggles, their hopes, their failures and successes and to get the atmosphere of the country one must know what her people are thinking about, talking about, what are their domestic, social and

¹ Madeline Heald, compiler, *Down Memory Lane with Some Early Rhodesian Women 1897-1923* (Bulawayo: Books of Rhodesia, 1979) xvii.

economic problems [and frustrations].²

Some of these issues have been discussed in the preceding chapters, but mostly from the men's point of view. It is only in Nan Patridge's *To Breathe and Wait*, where focus is made on how the women cope with the Second Chimurenga, and how they feel about their boys fighting in that war. The reader will find that the experiences of women in Rhodesia are highlighted more by female authors than by their male counterparts—authors such as Sheila MacDonald, Madeline Heald, Gertrude Page, Doris Lessing and many others whose works it has not been possible to include here. Those experiences include their love for the British Empire; how they see their role in building Rhodesia as service for the Empire; their plight as wives of Rhodesian farmers in a strange and alienating environment far away from home; changes in their love life, perhaps caused by the change in their circumstances in Rhodesia; women as managers of their homes in Rhodesia; and so on. Among the authors that shall be discussed, only Sarah Gertrude Millin, in her book, *The Burning Man*, has a man as protagonist, but a man whose habits are estranged from those of the mainstream white males.

In terms of the women characters' attitude towards the black people they find inhabiting the land that eventually becomes Rhodesia, the female authors are not too different from their men folk. They promote the same ideas, which are rooted in Cecil John Rhodes's ideology. Writing in 1978, at the peak of the Second Chimurenga, Madeline Heald, for

² *Ibid.*, xvii.

example, says that tribute should be paid “to all women living on farms, mines, in the operational areas and, in particular, to the countless number of women living in the Tribal Trust Lands who have suffered brutal atrocities and death at the hands of the terrorists.”³ She does not mention that besides suffering at the hands of the “terrorists,” those African women also suffer even more atrocities and death at the hands of, not only the regular Rhodesian forces, but also of the Selous Scouts. Since information on the activities of the Rhodesian forces and Selous Scouts is kept hidden from the population by the Rhodesian propaganda machine, probably Heald does not have the necessary facts to write otherwise.

In this discussion of women’s writing, attention will be paid to content, form and character in order to expose the meaning of their novels.

WOMEN WORKING FOR RHODESIA AND FOR EMPIRE

Gertrude Page, in her novel, *The Pathway*⁴, portrays two sisters who come to Rhodesia to help their two brothers settle well in the colony. Of the two sisters, Bobbie and Betty, it is Bobbie, the elder, who develops strong ties with the new colony, and all her actions are dedicated to serving Rhodesia and “the Empire.” Page’s narrator presents the life of women in Rhodesia as being much harder than that of men. The reason for this is that “The men have their change between work and leisure, between morning and evening, between week-days and Sunday. For the women it is all much the same—the same household worries every day,

³ Madeline Heald, *Down Memory Lane...*, xviii.

⁴ Gertrude Page, *The Pathway* (London, Melbourne and Toronto: Ward, Lock and Co., Ltd., 1914).

the same plucky, strenuous efforts to fill in hours that seem as if they did not want to be filled in but just to drag.”⁵

Another problem faced by women in early colonial Rhodesia is the lack of other female company in their surrounding environment: “For the man there is almost always another man near. For the woman, there is often no other woman within reach, except under difficulties which probably preclude all intercourse.”⁶

Many women, therefore, find Rhodesia unbearable. For Bobbie and Betty, however, Rhodesian life is just good. Betty spends time dreaming about her fiancé, while Bobbie persuades herself to believe that “the mere fact of helping to colonise a young colony was in its way a service...among some of the finest services that women are able to give.”⁷ Thus, all inconveniences and discomforts are seen as a necessary sacrifice in the bid to colonise Rhodesia for the British Empire. The inconveniences include the need to endure the white ants which “threatened to eat them out of house and home; the black ants that swarmed on all the food even into beds [and] the borers that rained down fine dust from the roof all over the hut.”⁸ Other great problems for women in Rhodesia include cooking without adequate utensils and cutlery, and living without furniture except that which could be made out of packing cases.⁹ Some of the women cannot cook at all! Bobby regards all this sort of hardship as something to be endured cheerfully, as

⁵ *Ibid* 52.

⁶ G. Page, *The Pathway* 52.

⁷ *Ibid* 53.

⁸ *Ibid* 55

much disappointment to be overcome, much depression to be grappled with.¹⁰ This is because “she had gone out to a colony gaily telling herself she would wrestle with all the difficulties gladly for the sake of the Empire.”¹¹

Bobbie, further, differentiates between two categories of settlers: the settler who has the country’s welfare and future at heart, and the “mean-souled [commercial] man of self-interests.”¹² Sir James Fortescue fits into the former category and his life is put at risk by the commercial, self-seeking Blake and Van Tyl. Sir James is said to be an Englishman who becomes one of Rhodesia’s great benefactors, “and first among those who came for sport and stayed for work, came to *take* and stayed *to give*.” He has an added advantage that he is never employed by the British South Africa Company. For that reason, “he was enabled to take up an independent attitude of infinite value to the settler community....”¹³

Bobbie has great, reverential respect for people like Sir James. Therefore, when his personal safety is threatened by what she considers to be the self-seeking, commercial group, she is willing to risk her own personal safety in order to warn him of the impending danger to his life. The danger is in the form of Blake Williams, a Second World War criminal who is an accomplice to Van Tyl, a South African Boer. Both plot to murder Fortescue out of greed so that they can share the gold that lies in his field by shifting pegs to their advantage.

⁹ *Ibid.* 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 96.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 217.

¹² *Ibid.* 85.

Bobbie succeeds in preventing Fortescue's murder and her reason for taking such a risk is that in saving Sir James Fortescue, she does it for the land which needs him: "you matter so much... The country needs you. I felt that nothing else mattered except saving you," she tells him afterwards.¹⁴ Fortescue, himself, dedicates his life to the colony so much that when asked why he remains unmarried, he only smiles and says that "he considers himself wedded to Rhodesia, and could not commit bigamy."¹⁵ This is the kind of dedication to country and Empire that complements Bobbie's.

Having saved Fortescue, Bobbie turns her attention to Harry Blake, the would-be accomplice in Fortescue's murder and resolves to reform him. Although she knows about his part in the plot, she chooses to cover it up because she wants to give him a chance "to wipe out this black stain and no one will know it."¹⁶ The narrator writes, "in giving him his acquittal she had given him a new and unexpected loathing of evil." In return, she wants him to wipe out the stain in his future by helping others who are weak. Bobbie's mission here matches that of the mysterious stranger in Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* who tasks Halket with doing good service for other people in order that he may be saved.

In this novel, Page seems to be saying that salvation for the man comes through the woman in Rhodesia, the woman whose dedication and

¹³ G. Page, *The Pathway* 125.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 85; 180.

¹⁵ G. Page, *The Pathway* 126.

¹⁶ *Ibid* 204-205.

interest to the colony and Empire is placed above everything else, including consideration for her own personal safety. Indeed, Bobbie saves three men: Fortescue, whom she rescues from possible assassination; Blake, whose crime she covers up in exchange for his behavioural transformation; and her boy friend Toby whom she finally marries and, thus, saving him from a heartbreak. All these men live a happy life afterwards as a result of the heroine Bobbie's intervention in their affairs.

According to Toby, Blake does actually change for the better.¹⁷ Bobbie marries Toby because she loves him even though she almost marries Sir James Fortescue for the sake of Rhodesia. Sir James realises that she would not be as happy with him as with Toby and graciously withdraws his proposal.

Land remains the chief attraction for all Ex-Englishmen-cum-Rhodesians in *The Pathway*. Rivalry between the British and the South African Boers over land is also an issue with Van Tyl, a South African Boer who is bitter towards Sir James and the rest of his English tribe on racial grounds. He believes, therefore, that he would be doing his Afrikaner race a favour by "putting him out o' the way."¹⁸ In this way, Van Tyl considers the conspiracy to assassinate Fortescue reasonable. Blake, on the other hand, is British, and so does not want to hand over Rhodesia to what he calls, "a lot of lazy Boers, but is driven more by greed and just a criminal mind to join Van Tyl's conspiracy against Fortescue."

¹⁷ G. Page, *The Pathway* 287-289.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 80-81.

In Page's other novel, *The Veldt Trail*, land, as an asset, has some magical grip on Sybil, Owen's widow.¹⁹ The couple is estranged before Owen dies. Sybil is a Londoner. She is a rich, frivolous girl who gets married to, but later separated from Owen, a rancher in Rhodesia, who dies after being mauled by a leopard one night on his ranch. In his will, Owen leaves his half share of the ranch to his wife, Sybil. As soon as she hears about this new acquisition, her personality changes. She tells her brother that a few months before, she would have been pleased by the prospect of the money she would have got from the sale of the property: "It isn't the money now, it's the *land*" which pleases and fascinates her more.²⁰ She is in a new frame of mind that makes her cease to enjoy the usual London entertainment that used to fill her days and nights. Finally she goes to claim her land in Rhodesia, telling her brother that she does not want to part with it. "I like the feeling that it is mine," she declares.²¹ Later, Sybil, like Bobbie, becomes an important woman who changes the character of the men around her for the better, when she has settled on her ranch in Rhodesia.

The settlers, in *The Pathway*, are occupied in diverse activities, chief among which is farming, because it is seen as the most secure occupation. Mining comes second and the commercial sector third. Toby, Bobbie's boyfriend, is an unsuccessful shopkeeper who ends up as a farmer. Page also focuses on the aspect of land acquisition, showing how this land is

¹⁹ Gertrude Page, *The Veldt Trail* (London, New York, Toronto & Melbourne: Cassell Company Ltd., October, 1919; reprinted November & December 1919; January, March & May 1920; cheap edition January 1921; Reprinted January, 1921; popular edition, 1923; reprinted November 1924).

²⁰ G. Page, *The Veldt Trail* 79.

simply pegged off by the settlers. The most dramatic method of land acquisition is the way Bay and Ken Glynn (Bobbie & Betty's brothers) win a disputed mining claim. The claim would "become the property of whoever pegged it first after sunrise," the community is told. So all that the two brothers have to do is to wake up earlier than anyone else who wants to compete, and peg the disputed land before sunrise, Cape Town time. Of course, they win the competition and become the proud owners of a large mining concern.²²

The settler farmer and miner both ignore the black people and use them as labour with the usual attendant prejudices such as we have experienced in other novels. They are given such names as Twilight (the "cook-boy"), Sixpence, and Smoke (Toby's boy), and so on.²³ The prejudice against them actually extends to criminality because sometimes the "boys" are accused of, and punished for crimes they have not committed.²⁴ The usual Shona-Ndebele prejudice abounds too.²⁵ The black servants, in turn, display the usual subservience. Jim, Fortescue's "boy," saves his master by getting shot by Van Tyl. Before he dies, Jim kills Van Tyl. His only death wish is that Fortescue, the man he has saved, should send a watch to his brothers in the village with an inscription that he died to save a white man's life. He feels proud that he has been privileged to die that way!²⁶

²¹ *Ibid* 80.

²² G. Page, *The Pathway* 292-298.

²³ *Ibid* 9; 107; 195.

²⁴ G. Page, *The Pathway* 79-91.

²⁵ *Ibid* 130-144.

²⁶ G. Page, *The Pathway* 164.

The same, usual prejudice appears in *Veldt Trail* where servants are called Saucepan, Moonlight, also known as Mephistopheles, Smoke, and so on. In addition, Page makes it a point to describe the mockery that accompanies such names, as for instance when Flip, Sybil's brother, talks to Elizabeth who is sure that she had sent Moonlight with some butter to him and Sybil. Flip informs her that it did not arrive and that "probably Moonlight put it in the sun to keep warm, and literally and figuratively it ran away." When Elizabeth finds that it is still in her house, she tells Flip that he seems "to have invested Moonlight with a brain. He brought it over to Chezula to keep it cool, before he started with the garden boy for your kit;" to which Flip answers, "Poor Moonlight, . . . He'll find life so much more complicated with a brain, won't he!"²⁷

In another passage, Sybil wishes Elizabeth had let her and her brother have the pet monkey to play with. Flip suggests that "Moonlight appears to be a pretty good substitute."²⁸ Obviously they see no difference between Puck, the monkey, and Moonlight, the "piccanin" boy of twelve years. On writing to her friends in England, Queenie and Higgy, Sybil, in *Veldt Trail*, does not fail to add that "she was waited on by a little black devil, dressed in a fair-sized red pocket handkerchief whose joy in life was to dip his fingers in any available pot of treacle or jam, and then sit in the sun and suck them. Once he dipped them in ink . . . and after the first suck, rubbed them dry on his skin." Then she comments, "sometimes it is very convenient to be black."²⁹

²⁷G. Page, *The Veldt Trail* 141-142.

²⁸*Ibid* 131-132.

Frequently in the novels we do find expressions to the effect that black people have no feelings, and so are unable to feel pain. An expression carrying such sentiment is found in *The Veldt Trail* where Elizabeth is “acting the doctor” to a woman with a bad gush on her head. The gush is a result of her being hit with a hoe by her belligerent husband. Elizabeth then explains to Flip that the woman does not seem to mind the wound and the pain. Flip comments that “their” heads are very tough, even though he has just come into the country and does not know much about blacks. Elizabeth goes on to suggest that she will give the wounded woman a piece of buck meat which will make her quite happy.³⁰

This kind of mockery goes hand in hand with the use of cart-grease and moustache pomade to cure native people’s wounds. The other medicaments used are creosote, iodoform, a few drops of ink on a lump of sugar or a spoonful of varnish—“anything that has a pretty filthy smell,” for the treatment of natives’ stomach trouble. After all, “a native wouldn’t give a ‘thank you’ for ‘muti’ without a vile taste, or a good sting in it,” Elizabeth concludes her knowledgeable explanation. Flip’s response to Elizabeth’s lecture reminds the reader of the British Halls of Fame, where the ideological background to colonisation emanates: “I expect Exeter Hall and Downing Street combined cannot achieve with natives what one English woman and a little cart-grease can do in half an hour.”³¹ With such “doctoring” going on, one wonders whether the ailments are not exacerbated. Perhaps, as Elizabeth believes, faith does the rest of the curing.

²⁹ G. Page, *The Veldt Trail* 166.

³⁰ *Ibid* 121.

Evidently, for Page, the role of the English woman in Africa goes beyond looking after her and her man's affairs. It includes dealings with the natives' soul and body. In the process of describing these varied roles, Page exhibits the prejudices of the white people of the day toward the black people.

In another of Page's novels, *The Edge o' Beyond*,³² Dinah describes the "cook-boy" as a "pedigree chimpanzee" when she fails to communicate with him. She wants him to cook something she describes, and he cannot understand her because he does not speak her language, neither does she speak his. It turns out that Dinah herself cannot cook her own type of food.³³ She, her brother and his two friends, therefore, are resolved, hereafter, to find "anything that could cook—male or female."³⁴ In terms of naming, there are names like Blockhead, Bucket and Sixpence, gracing the homestead of the good masters and mistresses.³⁵ Even Oswald's mother calls the Africans "those poor, misguided niggers" who should be made to join her son in prayer every night to find guidance.³⁶ Page writes all this to demonstrate the ingrained prejudice against Africans at the time of her writing. She dramatises that prejudice very well in the interaction of her white characters with black people. This gives the reader an idea of the state of affairs between the races at that time, and this knowledge is very useful because without it one would never understand the African reaction later to the colonial conditions.

³¹ G. Page, G. Page, *The Veldt Trail* 124-125.

³² Gertrude Page, *The Edge O' Beyond* (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., nd= no date).

³³ *Ibid* 40-41.

³⁴ *Ibid* 41.

³⁵ *Ibid* 28; 43; 96; 108.

³⁶ *Ibid* 47.

Page is also very informative on the role of women in the colonising process.

What happens in *The Pathway*, for example, is to highlight the role of women behind the men who appear to be the epitome of the settler farming and mining communities, and both consolidate the colonisation process and the growth and development of the British Empire. The enthusiastic women in this novel are Bobbie, the heroine, and her sister, Betty. They seem to be behind all the men's endeavours in the colonising of Rhodesia. Similarly, in *The Veldt Trail*, men come to Rhodesia to seek a fortune in farming, ranching and, later, mining. The women follow them to bolster their efforts and to ensure that their stay in Rhodesia becomes permanent.

In Heald's compiled biographies of early Rhodesian women, all the women whose tales are compiled tell a similar story, that of helping their men in the colonising of Rhodesia. Some take a leading role in various entrepreneurships in order to advance Rhodesia, a land they find to be more beloved and liberating than Britain, their homeland. Such entrepreneurs include a Jewish woman who is married to a German. Both of their parents disown them for their union. Down and out, they head for Rhodesia. Because the husband has no marketable skill, the wife starts a "Market Grill," an eating house providing meals to farmers and miners in and around Bulawayo. Thus, it is the woman who becomes enterprising.³⁷ Another woman, Miss Rosa Hayman, comes to Rhodesia and becomes the first colonial woman to buy her own farm. She single-

handedly has to cope with several farm problems, including that of labour, because the Ndebele resent working for a white woman.³⁸ However, later on, she calls on her brother to come and join her and help run the farm.

Mrs. Winifred Mary Tolbutt is the first female taxi driver in Bulawayo and Salisbury, another very enterprising initiative,³⁹ while Mrs. Frances M.M. Kennedy owns a mine twenty-five miles from Filabusi. She explains, "...the claims were all registered in my name. I took over the running of the mine completely and my husband rarely visited it."⁴⁰ These women cope with "as much courage as the men, if not more."⁴¹

Heald writes biographies of non-fictional women, who struggle under difficult conditions including disease, yet they feel very happy about such a struggle because it is done for Rhodesia. Page describes the same kind of women in fiction for the same purpose: to highlight their contributions to colonial Rhodesia and to the British Empire.

One other concern that Heald focuses on is the lack of birth control facilities, so that childbirth is too frequent, taking a toll on women's health. Mrs. Phyllis Georgina Addis, for example, reports that her mother bears five children between 1910 and 1921, a period of only eleven years.⁴² Then the narrator writes, "Mrs. Addis ... became a member of the

³⁷ Madeline Heald, *Down Memory Lane*, 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 153-159.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 288-289.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 191 (185-198).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴² Madeline Heald, "Life in Early Salisbury," in *Down Memory Lane*, 1-4. See also "Family Trekking to Rhodesia," *Ibid.*, 7-9. Many hardships are described here including an epidemic of rabies. Evidently

International Correspondence Society and today has pen-pals all over the world, putting Rhodesia's case to as many people as possible."⁴³ She does not say what this *case* is, but writing in 1978, the reader can guess the subject matter of this case.

Speaking about Rhodesia, Mrs. Charter says, "Our country has progressed very quickly since [1939] and we have never looked back. When I look at Salisbury nowadays, it is with a sense of almost personal achievement. The last years have shown great results, so our fight for Responsible Government was worth all we had put into it."⁴⁴

Mrs. Charter emphasises that the Rhodesian fight for self-government is also a woman's fight. Heald and Page highlight the same point.

In *The Veldt Trail*, the other female character, Elizabeth, feels very happy that her brother listens to her entreaties to leave England after school to come and join him on a ranch in Rhodesia instead of continuing to live with their uncle and aunt since their parents had died. From the moment she arrives in Rhodesia, she loves everything about it, and she is filled with blissful contentment in a country where "some people might have thought it lacked animation."⁴⁵ Elizabeth's happiness is derived from keeping house for her brother, Jim Lyall, and his ranching partner, Owen Lack. She also enjoys playing with her numerous, odd pets comprising seven dogs, three cats, a tiny baboon named Puck, and a Basuto pony

it must have been hell where these people were coming from for them to willingly endure such hard times.

⁴³ "Life in Early Rhodesia," *Ibid* 4.

⁴⁴ "Early Days in Gatooma," *Ibid* 69.

⁴⁵ G. Page, *The Veldt Trail* 1; 6.

called Pegasus. Her brother and his partner consider her to be a “capital little housekeeper and colonist.”⁴⁶

Elizabeth, on her part, is so mature and enthusiastic about her role that when a leopard mauls Owen, she immediately takes charge of the situation. She dispatches notes to neighbours for help, and makes a firm decision to take him to Mazowe hospital, thirty miles away, on a *machila* transport drawn by two “boys.” She and one neighbour, Ridley, follow the *machila* on horseback, at night. When Owen protests her accompanying them, Ridley rebukes him, saying, “No use, old son... She is bossing the whole show, and when a woman is bent on that, it is a waste of time to interfere, especially when there’s a hurt animal in the case.”⁴⁷ She is generally the rallying spirit in this tragedy. Because of her determination, Owen actually gets to Mazowe hospital, though he fails to survive the mauling.

It is after Owen’s death that another fiery woman by the name of Sybil joins Elizabeth to claim her half-share of the ranch. As discussed earlier, this Rhodesian acquisition changes Sybil’s life style. She becomes serious-minded and refuses to sell her half share to Jim Lyall, Elizabeth’s brother and her late husband’s partner. It can, therefore, be safely said, Rhodesia changes her, and she herself acknowledges this change from the moment she decides to come to Rhodesia. The narrator writes, “Thinking about it afterwards, it appeared to her as if suddenly she had been possessed by some new personality that answered in her place, and

⁴⁶ *Ibid* 4.

⁴⁷ G. Page, *The Veldt Trail* 12.

framed her words and wishes independently of the self she had always known. Some mysterious force seemed to actuate her, whether she wished or no.”⁴⁸ Although she has been an irresponsible individual, living a frivolous life of parties and dances, Page ensures that her determination comes out strongly. Her brother, Flip, who “knows her sex too well to raise desire by opposition,” makes sure that he does not discourage her from going to Rhodesia. By putting emphasis on “her sex” as opposed to her individual personality, it seems Page wants to deal with *woman* specifically. The same kind of remark is made about Elizabeth by Ridley, where he says, “...when a woman is bent on that, it is only a waste of time to interfere....”⁴⁹ The emphasis is, again, on *woman*.

Sybil uses her tenacious determination, not only to conquer Jim Lyall, her very reluctant and arrogant partner in business, but also to conquer his heart, so that at the end of the book preparations are underway for their marriage.⁵⁰ She also manages to convince her very reluctant brother, Flip, to come with her to Rhodesia. In the end, he, too, falls in love and gets married to Elizabeth Lyall, a woman who is Miss Rhodesia herself because of her dedication to the country. She is the one, after all, who tells Flip: “I shall be glad to help to make you comfortable if I can, for the short time you are here, for the honour of Rhodesia;” to which Flip answers, “I am glad we are able to enlist Rhodesia upon our side.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 82.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 256-269.

⁵¹ G. Page, *The Veldt Trail* 125.

When Flip indicates to Elizabeth that she need not desert Rhodesia by marrying him, since he can come there instead, Elizabeth exclaims excitedly with shining eyes, “Oh, that seems *too* beautiful...to have you and Rhodesia as well.”⁵² As for Sybil, besides marrying Jim, a devoted Rhodesian rancher and her new partner, she proposes to build what she calls “a new temple to the New Dawn,” on a special part of her land, specially preserved for that purpose. Asked by her friend, Queenie, what its purpose will be, she answers that its form will determine that purpose. But it will be a wonderful health spot... “Suppose a temple built in the name of a practical religion of love took the form of a Rest House or Hydro for the benefit of the whole country, instead of a church for the benefit of a few near at hand?”⁵³

Sybil has uplifted herself from being a simple girl who enjoys her personal life lavishly because she happens to have the money to spend on herself, to a woman who thinks of others selflessly, and who wishes to build a temple to minister unto other people. So she considers her love for Jim as something that goes beyond personal happiness; something that should be shared with the people of Rhodesia and those of her country, England. This selflessness is manifested in her ability to bring to the colony, not just herself who is the heir to a piece of property, but also her brother who marries and settles there. Her two friends, Queenie and Higgy, come too, even though under normal circumstances, they would be the most unlikely candidates for the bush, since they possess very stereotyped images of what is there—mere “things” like cows and

⁵² *Ibid* 220.

⁵³ G. Page, *The Veldt Trail* 305.

niggers.⁵⁴ Sybil's purpose for going to Rhodesia is to fulfil her belief that "at present there is a great need of population,"⁵⁵ which indicates a futuristic outlook on her part.

Thus, Gertrude Page has, again, used the theme of love and the vital role of women to show how colonialism in Rhodesia was consolidated. *The Veldt Trail* was very widely read and very popular in its time, judged by the numerous reprints the book enjoyed.⁵⁶ The novel was a best seller. This means that its influence must have been quite considerable on the British who would then come to Rhodesia or South Africa to visit or to settle. A special place was reserved for the role of women in that colonising process, particularly when people read that young girls like Sybil and Elizabeth automatically became mistresses in charge of "boys." English readers would also believe that if young men like Jim Lyall, Owen Lack and Flip Beaumont could become masters overnight, and own large tracts of land for farming, ranching or mining, with the good potential of becoming rich overnight, they, too, could hazard a chance.

Generally the prospects in the colonies are portrayed as being better than remaining in Britain. By going to the colonies, Jim has, at least, remained his own master, the narrator says, and he has been the one to benefit from his own unremitting toil.⁵⁷ Another reason for preferring the colonies seems to be the need to run away from the crowdedness of England: "An honest, *bona fide* Englishman can't walk along his own

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 247.

⁵⁵ *Ibid* 250.

⁵⁶ See footnote 19 above.

⁵⁷ G. Page, *The Veldt Trail* 303.

pavement now, without getting pushed from pillar to post,” Flip complains.⁵⁸ Even driving is said to be next to impossible because there is too much traffic.⁵⁹ Under these circumstances, Rhodesia offers an excellent alternative, Sybil tells her brother. Evidently many of the British readership would have identified with these sentiments.

THE UNHAPPY, PERSECUTED, COLONIAL WOMAN

While Gertrude Page has written about the dedicated woman in Rhodesia, she has also portrayed the flip side of the coin—the unhappy, persecuted colonial woman. She does this in two of her novels, *Where Strange Roads Go Down*⁶⁰ and *The Edge O’ Beyond*. Both novels are powerful love stories dealing with women’s needs and emotions, how their husbands ignore these needs and emotions, and how they take their wives for granted. Page portrays this aspect of the colonisation of Rhodesia to show that, at times, the struggles of the women become unbearable. Indeed, she dedicates *The Edge O’ Beyond* “TO ALL THE WOMEN IN THE COLONIES OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE WHO ARE ROUGHING IT FOR THE SAKE OF HUSBANDS, FATHERS, BROTHERS AND THEIR COUNTRY.”⁶¹

In *The Pathway* and *The Veldt Trail*, the women are sisters helping their brothers cope with Rhodesia. Eventually the sisters get married, but their wifely roles fall outside the scope of the novels. In *Edge O’ Beyond* and

⁵⁸ *Ibid* 213.

⁵⁹ *Ibid* 273-274.

⁶⁰ Gertrude Page, *Where Strange Roads Go Down* (London: Hurst & Blackett Ltd., 1913 [?], 15th edition).

Where the Strange Roads Go Down, the women are wives who follow the husbands to Rhodesia and try to cope the best way possible, as wives and as individuals. Their husbands spend practically all their time working in the fields with cattle, crops and the “boys,” while the women have to entertain themselves somehow. Into this latter category of women, falls Doris Lessing’s Mary Turner in her novel, The Grass is Singing.⁶²

Page, in Where the Strange Roads Go Down, shifts her setting from being all Rhodesian, to half Rhodesian and half British. The link between the two settings is kept by having Jo Latham on a six-month home visit from Rhodesia where she and her husband own a ranch and have been living for ten years. Page’s purpose for having her in England is to enlighten the reader and British society, in general, on what life is like in Rhodesia for an English woman living alone with only her husband for company.

Generally, the British public is portrayed as believing what they read in the Rhodesian novel, “about impossible lotharies, and sunshine and flowers...” There is also an idealistic romance about Rhodesian men as shown in what one eager woman, a Mrs. Macdeene, asks Jo: “But men?... You seem to have such glorious men out there. I’ve read about them in Rhodesian novels. All good-looking, and aristocratic, and brave, and interesting. One really longs to see them,” she concludes.⁶³ When Jo answers that, that image is wrong; that the men are usually “coatless, collarless, unwashed and unshaven; [that really], they might be divided into those who have baths once a week, those who have them twice a

⁶¹ G. Page, *The Edge O’ Beyond*, Dedication Page.

⁶² Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1950).

year, and those who rely upon a shower or two in the rainy season,” Lady Highcastle protests, “My dear Jo...don’t be too much of an iconoclast. You will stop the flow of settlers if you trample on everyone’s pet ideas and take away all the romance.”⁶⁴

It is these romantic ideas that Nita Dubeen, who wants to follow her fiancé to that colony, has of Rhodesia, not the realistic picture as Jo paints it. So Jo’s aunt, Sophia, wants her to talk to Nita, to try and give her the realistic picture of what her fiancé is likely to be. Jo believes that Nita is not suitable for a settler farmer’s wife’s role “among savages.”⁶⁵ Instead, she should marry a rich man and have a fine house and a car. This turns out to be an accurate assessment of Nita. Some women, like Jo, manage to cope, but others, like Nita, fail dismally. The prediction actually comes true as Nita falls into the category of women who end up having a lover, Aubrey St. Leger Denison, in order to stave off boredom. Denison, indeed, owns a mansion and a motor car, and delicate Nita cannot help but fall for the luxury and comfort offered by all this wealth.

Page has portrayed these two extreme female characters to sensitise both men and women to the hazards of colonial life to their mental health, which ultimately affects their physical health. It is important, she seems to be saying, especially for men, to be sensitive to the creative needs of their wives in order that life may be more meaningful for both husband and wife in the colonies. This message comes through very lucidly in the character of Jo Latham. She has such a strong personality that people

⁶³ G. Page, *Where Strange Roads Go Down* 23; 38.

⁶⁴ *Ibid* 38-39.

look to her for advice, and/or direction in times of trouble. Thus, in England she alerts Nita to the problems in Rhodesia for which she might want to be prepared but, of course, Nita does not take the warning seriously. Faced with loneliness, boredom and a dull, uncreative husband, predictably Nita runs off to a lover, Denison, who is a fifty-year old Casanova. It is in this episode that we see Jo at her very best—tactful yet frank; persuasive and sympathetic without that superior judgmental attitude someone else could so easily adopt.

Jo tells Dendale, Nita's fiancé-cum-husband, that she wants to save Nita from her fall into Denison's arms "for the sake of the country, as well as her own sake."⁶⁶ This is when we begin to see Jo's role rising to a higher plane from personal considerations. As the problem of finding an appropriate strategy to deal with Nita's predicament becomes imperative, she "knit her straight brows over the problem—a problem pressing often upon the minds of those few who care for the well-being of the women of Rhodesia."⁶⁷ So she lectures Dendale that a man cannot bring "a young, dainty pretty, inexperienced girl like Nita out to share his home [without being] prepared to be father, mother and sister to her, as well as husband."⁶⁸ Dendale is the young, self-righteous husband who believes that he is the plaintiff—wronged by his wife who runs to another man. Since Dendale has not been emotionally supportive to his wife, he should not blame her for taking such an extreme action, Jo tells him. This piece of advice is given to a man who does not believe that he is to blame in

⁶⁵ G. Page, *Where Strange Roads Go Down* 44.

⁶⁶ G. Page, *Where Strange Roads Go Down* 213.

⁶⁷ *Ibid* 217.

⁶⁸ *Ibid* 226.

any way for his wife's unbecoming behaviour. It is Jo who opens Dendale's eyes to his folly and selfishness, the wrong values that exasperate Nita so much that she runs away from him.

The problem with Dendale is not that he is consciously cruel to his wife. He is simply too dull and extremely naïve. Jo points this fact out to him, to his utter amazement. She tells him that he has been thoughtless, and has not tried hard enough to look at things with Nita's eyes and Nita's brain. Instead, he has been wrapped up in his farm. He has been feeding Nita on an emotional starvation diet, and only women can understand this starvation and how it can undermine their resolutions and principles... "men don't suffer the same way," she concludes.⁶⁹ As for her position between right and wrong, Jo takes Nita's side regardless of her weaknesses, as she asserts, "You see, I'm quite determined to defend her to the last. You men always get off so easily, and a woman generally has to pay such a heavy price."⁷⁰ From today's perspective in respect of man-woman relationship, Jo may be regarded a feminist who is ready to espouse the rights of women.

Evidently, Page, in *Where Strange Roads Go Down*, pleads the woman's cause. There is no mistaking her position in the matter. Nita cannot cope as a newly wed wife partly because her husband is really never there for her when she needs emotional support. He cares more about his cattle and his farm. Things that matter to her, such as how to deal with African/native house workers, seem not to assume the same importance

⁶⁹ *Ibid* 229.

⁷⁰ G. Page, *Where Strange Roads Go Down* 230.

to him. Entertainment, satisfying her artistic skills and other similar social activities are petty issues to him, yet they mean the world to Nita. That is why Jo charges Dendale with thoughtlessness. Jo herself has gone through these problems, and this is why she knows them. The difference between her and Nita is that she has learned “to take one’s starvation diet and...to laugh at it, pretending it was the banquet one had set out to find. That at least was the spirit of those who kept the colours [of Rhodesia] flying high—whether in the thrill of the forefront, or in the lonely blockhouse or tedious barracks.”⁷¹

Of course, Page is careful not to present a super heroine in Jo Latham. She hurts like any other woman, and we get to know the story of her former boyfriend, Jack Desborough, whom she loved greatly, but could not marry because one doctor advised he did not have long to live. By the time he received a contradictory diagnosis on his health, it was too late because in anger and frustration, Jo had already married Cyril Latham. Jo suffers a mental and physical breakdown when Jack passes by her home, and they meet quite accidentally, eleven years after their parting.⁷² Jo, therefore, is just as vulnerable as Nita in this situation as she contemplates running away from Cyril to Jack, who now resides and farms in Northern Rhodesia. She wonders whether she is “no better than women who throw everything to the winds for the sake of their own desire...After all the effort and warfare, and striving of her life, would

⁷¹ *Ibid* 233.

⁷² *Ibid* 257; 278; 279.

she go down helplessly before the first great onslaught that threatened her defences?" she wonders.⁷³

In spite of her great anguish, she overcomes this very strong temptation to leave Cyril and so she resolves to stay on with him. She, therefore, conquers the satanic thought driving her momentarily to "be glad and proud to lose the whole world to come to [Jack]...for she would lose more than one world—several worlds."⁷⁴ Jo also manages to shoo off Denison in order to give a second chance to Nita's and Geoffrey Dendale's marriage.

In *Where the Strange Roads Go Down*, Jo Latham is another strong woman who reigns like Elizabeth and Sybil in *The Veldt Trail*; and Bobbie in *The Pathway*. These women command power and respect in the colony and men listen to them. Page places the role of the woman in colonial Rhodesia, squarely in the forefront.

The theme of insensitive husbands is highlighted even more in Page's other novel, *The Edge o' Beyond*. In this novel, Oswald Grant marries Joyce Gray at the recommendation of his mother. However, upon arrival in Rhodesia, Joyce finds herself more attached to her wedding gift, a Devonshire pony, than to her husband, whom she resents, generally, and, more specifically, for kicking her pony. She resents him, too, for kicking

⁷³ *Ibid* 247.

⁷⁴ *Ibid* 248.

a puppy so hard that he breaks its leg.⁷⁵ To her, this is evidence that he is not only cruel, but also a coward.

The pony, whose name is Mischief, dies from horse sickness. While it is sick, Oswald refuses to fetch a Vet because he thinks he would make no difference to the pony's illness. Joyce suffers emotionally at the loss of her pony and she feels deeply deprived. That emotional suffering slides into homesickness and a desperate longing for the dead pony. She feels alienated both from her pony and Devonshire, her homeland. Clearly, Joyce is far from being one of those lady Empire builders who sacrifices their lives in the wilderness for Rhodesia and Empire. She is one of those women who suffers at the hands of their husbands and who does not really care about the colony and any of its vicissitudes. In Joyce's case, this attitude is understandable because her marriage is arranged for her. It is, therefore, devoid of love. The girl has no choice in her fate, being a poor girl with no father and a mother who is dying of cancer.

Once again, Page highlights the difference between the generally good life of man and the plight of the woman in Rhodesia. Besides Oswald being a man who is incapable of ever empathising with another's condition, "he had his work, and his work interested him. He had a fair sprinkling of men friends around. He had a weekly jaunt to town, when he attended meetings, where his word was looked upon as law in farming matters, which was a form of flattery his soul loved. He had, lastly, his change between morning and evening, when he could thoroughly enjoy a

⁷⁵ G. Page, *The Edge O' Beyond* 13; 14.

well-earned rest.”⁷⁶ For the woman, on the other hand, “the hours held deadness, and dragged themselves by with lagging footsteps.”⁷⁷ It is a situation aptly described by Jo Latham in *Where the Strange Roads Go Down* when she says, “...precious few men ever see anything from a woman’s point of view...And of course, from a man’s own point, it is monstrous that his wife should not be satisfied with his own lordly self, and a nice piece of wilderness, with a few granite kopjes thrown in.”⁷⁸

Clearly, Oswald does not understand why Joyce should be so heart broken by the death of a mere pony. He can, after all, buy her another one soon, and for now, there is a gentle mule, which would serve the same purpose. As for loneliness and boredom or difficulties, he does not see how a woman should claim to experience those. He believes that “it’s a fine thing to be a woman, and just be taken care of, and have no worry at all; nothing but holidays.”⁷⁹

To be fair to Oswald, at the beginning he seems to behave the way he does out of ignorance of any other better way. When the pony dies, he tries to sympathise with his wife but she has internalised her resentment of their entire life style, so that she cannot just stand him and his kopjes. She falls ill with a fever and ends up hallucinating, a sign of mental breakdown. She tells the newly arrived doctor Lawson, all her frustrations with Rhodesia and with Oswald. This is when she actually excuses his behaviour because she understands it as a manifestation of his

⁷⁶ *Ibid* 18.

⁷⁷ *Ibid* 18.

⁷⁸ G. Page, *Where Strange Roads Go Down* 45.

⁷⁹ G. Page, *The Edge o' Beyond* 124.

personality and a sign of his love of Rhodesia. He is also a self-centred person who finds it difficult to empathise with another. Yet this very country he loves stifles her, she says, “I can’t breathe among these kopjes and there is never anyone to help me.”⁸⁰ The bottom line is that Joyce and Oswald are a mismatch because they are brought up in different traditions. They are bound to view all matters differently and as time goes on, Oswald becomes more and more selfish, self-righteous, self-centred, unreasonable and insensitive to his wife’s plight.

The other woman in the novel, *The Edge o' Beyond*, Dinah Webberley, who visits her brother in Rhodesia, is also no Empire builder. She declares that she would rather “sweep a room in a living world than be a queen in a dead one,” the dead one being Rhodesia.⁸¹ Living here permanently would make her feel as if she had sought bread in life but life had given her a stone. She would die with a longing to hurl it back at her head.⁸² Dinah dislikes colonial life so much that Ted Burnett, one of her brother’s neighbours, takes her on a visit to meet Mrs. Chaldecott, an English woman who succeeds in finding what she calls, compensations, in the Rhodesian life. When Dinah expresses her total dislike for the colonial life, Mrs. Chaldecott’s answer reveals another reason why these English people prefer to suffer hardships in strange lands than live in their own country. She says “it is a lot better than being only a number in some suburban road of jerry-built villas.”⁸³

⁸⁰ G. Page, *The Edge o' Beyond* 34-35.

⁸¹ *Ibid* 45.

⁸² *Ibid* 56.

⁸³ *Ibid* 103.

Page's idea in presenting women like Mrs. Chaldecott who have a positive attitude towards Rhodesia seems to be to convert the "wild," restless ones like Dinah, and many more in Britain who may be like her, to see the goodness of the colony and colonial life. Sybil, in *Where the Strange Roads Go Down*, is such a convert. Dinah seems to be getting converted already after visiting Mrs. Chaldecott and her family of two daughters. She hides the "sense of depression" that she feels. The depression is felt because she is beginning to be converted to this life, yet she does not want to admit that feeling—a spirit of sentiment as she calls it, and a vague Rhodesian calling for her to "come back and *stay*." After all, once the country "gets hold of you it *never lets go*."⁸⁴ It seems Rhodesia beckons even Dinah, to get married and live there. Dinah gets married to Ted Burnett, a Rhodesian farmer, but settles in London instead of Rhodesia. Burnett reasons that it is not fair to ask Dinah to give up everything to come and live with him. So he decides to meet her halfway—he will work in England and then together they will visit his farm in Rhodesia, the Southern Cross, from time to time.⁸⁵ The compromise appears to work for them. Dinah is essentially no Empire builder.

It appears as if Page also wants to highlight the plight of young, inexperienced girls like Nita in *Where Strange Roads Go Down*, and Joyce in *Edge o' Beyond*. These girls get married to Rhodesians, yet they are too frail to stand and endure the physical and emotional hardships that the colony and their husbands exert on them. Both girls end up being

⁸⁴ G. Page, *The Edge o' Beyond* 57; 112.

⁸⁵ *Ibid* 216.

rescued by lovers. However, while Nita and Audrey Denison actually do not live together, and Nita's husband, Dendale, recognises his shortcomings as a husband, Joyce Grant ends up living with Dr. Cecil Lawson. Oswald Grant punishes her for life by refusing to divorce her. So she can never marry Lawson. In this latter case, Page highlights the insensitivity of Oswald Grant as the cause of Joyce's emotional breakdown. Oswald also causes the death of their baby son because he refuses to spare the mules for a day to let Joyce go to Salisbury to consult a doctor over the baby's seeming illness. By the time he is willing to do so, it is too late—it is night-time and the rain has been pouring for two days, flooding all the rivers and destroying the drifts. Meanwhile, the baby's illness worsens and he dies. This is when Dr. Lawson steps in, collects Joyce and takes her back to London to live with him. In doing so he has anticipated having to give up his medical practice and to live in scorn, since the British society alienates people who have thus eloped.⁸⁶

In this novel, *The Edge o' Beyond*, Page focuses on the divorce laws of Britain by getting Dinah to express the desire to have them changed. But this is done in Dinah's typical humorous fashion as she says, "I shall head a huge procession, probably on stilts, to the Houses of Parliament, and there, waving my stilts wildly in the air, I shall demand redress" so that the wives can also sue for divorce.⁸⁷ She reassures the good Physician that she and her husband are fighting for Joyce's and his position: "The world is only heaving mountains but we are hurling

⁸⁶ G. Page, *The Edge o' Beyond* 209-210; 216; 233.

⁸⁷ *Ibid* 262.

volcanoes...”⁸⁸ The divorce laws referred to favour men, regardless of how the woman suffers in matrimony. However, by getting humorous Dinah to articulate the need for change, Page appears not to be challenging these laws seriously enough to effect any changes. She just points at this social anomaly. Joyce dies without getting her divorce and, therefore, without remarrying. Page is no revolutionary. Joyce’s death seems to imply that, at times, Rhodesia destroys some of England’s best women in the bid to colonise her, and no amount of love and care as that offered by the good Doctor, can prevent such tragic destruction, nurtured at the hands of her ruthless men.

Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* reads like one of Page’s novels, except that it is a much more tragic story than Page’s stories. It fits in with the group of novels that explore the plight of women married to Rhodesian farmers who get thoroughly destroyed by the environment, the loneliness and the general misery and hardships of poverty in a strange land. Into such a fate fall Mary Turner and her husband, Dick Turner.

Richard Turner is a poor farmer who decides that he needs a wife. So he drives into town one day, sees a girl, dreams about her for a few months, drives back into town and tells the girl that he wants to marry her. Mary, who has her own troubled background, a secretary at a city firm, carefree and independent, suffers from peer pressure to marry as all other girls, including some of her friends, have already done so. She does not enjoy the romance that comes with courtship and marriage, but feels she is obliged to marry someone at some point, especially that she has reached

⁸⁸ *Ibid* 262-263.

the age of thirty still a free woman. Thus, when Richard/Dick Turner comes along, proposing to marry her, Mary accepts because he comes at a time that she, too, is beginning to feel the desperate need for matrimony. She is happy to be spared the ordeal of courtship. She is also pleased that there is to be no honeymoon to contend with before settling down to a sexless marriage with Dick.

The story of *The Grass is Singing* is one of Dick and Mary on their farm in Ngesi, Southern Rhodesia; a farm on which Dick works hard from morning till dark, literally, yet a farm that remains unproductive, and so, one that Mary, a town girl, hates with a passion. While it is a sad story for Dick, it is a tragic tale for Mary Turner. Dick, like Oswald in Page's *Edge o' Beyond*, is so obsessed with his farm that he devotes all his waking hours to it, while Mary, like Joyce Grant, remains at home, a very poorly built, hot house, with nothing to do. For a girl who hates country life anyway, this is the beginning of her tragedy. The husband shows no creativity in his dealings with her. He could have invited her to go with him to see the lands he is farming. But on their first morning after marriage, he rushes out to the lands, leaving her alone to wander around the poor shack with Samson, a native servant. It is this abandonment that eats into her life right from the beginning of their marriage.

Dick, like Oswald, is insensitive to the needs of his wife. During their first breakfast together, Dick is emotionally taken over, not by his new bride, but by the farm problems: "He sat heavy and silent through the meal, a nervous tension between his eyes. The planter had broken down, a water cart had lost a wheel, the wagon had been driven up a hill with

the break on, in sheer light-hearted carelessness. He was back in it, over his head in it, with the familiar imitations and the usual sense of helplessness against cheerful incompetence. Mary said nothing: this was all too strange to her.”⁸⁹

In order to counter the boredom, Mary sews endlessly, then she embroiders, white washes all the walls of their house, and when that is finished, she tries to read, unsuccessfully, since her mind wanders. She suffers from excessive heat, which is worsened by the house’s corrugated iron sheets of the house. These could have been improvement if Dick had agreed to have a ceiling put in. Her frustration mounts; frustration that finds its outlet in her hatred for the Africans or natives.

There is also the issue of what is “important” in their lives. As in the case of Nita and Dendale in *Where the Strange Roads Go Down*, the things that are important to the wife do not seem so to the husband. In Mary’s case it is the issue of raisins, which she gives her “cookboy” for the pudding. When the pudding is served, the raisins are practically missing from it. She accuses the “boy” of stealing them and of lying about it, and then she cries. While she thinks it is important for Samson not to lie to her about the raisins, Dick can only remark that he thought there was something “really wrong.” He does not consider the issue to be so important as to deserve Mary’s tantrum. Mary is, therefore, not comforted, and her frustration finds its outlet in her hatred for black men and a loathing for black women. She hates the men’s “half-naked, thick muscled black bodies stooping in the mindless rhythm of their work. She

⁸⁹ Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 72.

hated their sullenness, their averted eyes when they spoke to her, their veiled insolence; and she hated more than anything, with a violent physical repulsion, the heavy smell that came from them, a hot, sour animal smell.”⁹⁰

The native or kaffir women, too, do not escape Mary’s hatred: “If she disliked native men, she loathed the women. She hated the exposed fleshiness of them, their soft brown bodies and soft bashful faces that were also insolent and inquisitive, and their chattering voices that held a brazen fleshy undertone...they were alien and primitive creatures with ugly desires she could not bear to think about.”⁹¹

Her frustration further manifests itself in her refusal to accept her neighbour's, Mrs. Slatter’s company and friendship. Once, when her husband is ill with malaria and she has to supervise the farm workers, Mary's frustration manifests itself in her lashing out at Moses, one of the workers whom she considers rude, with a sjambok that cuts him from behind the head down to the face. Finally she goes crazy, because she cannot stand the pressure any more.⁹²

Dick refuses to do things that might ease that pressure, such as putting ceilings in the house, which would reduce the effect of heat in summer; or starting a family so that at least Mary could have the company of a baby. He also refuses her the luxury of cooling herself by splashing water onto her body because it is a waste of precious water, insisting, instead, that

⁹⁰ *Ibid* 141-142.

⁹¹ D. Lessing 115-116.

she should use the bathtub. She, on the other hand, considers the bathtub to be so greasy and unbearably dirty that she forces her house servant to scrub it all day. At the end of the day, the servant tenders his resignation. All this does not add good humour to Mary and Dick Turner's marriage, and Mary sees herself constantly at the receiving end of all that is bad about it.

Dick does not render much help either when Mary fails to get along with the native servants. Finally, when all the servants have left, one after the other, he forces her to take in Moses, the native whose face and neck she cut with a sjambok earlier on. Besides, "all this time [Dick] treated her like a brother" rather than a sexual partner.⁹³ So she develops a loathing for him, too, even though she really does not care for sex. The two of them strike the reader as very queer!

Mary's inner disintegration begins earnestly after she has run away from the farm to town, hoping to secure her old job as secretary.⁹⁴ The employer turns her down, and the narrator says, "this was the beginning of an inner disintegration in her. It began with this numbness, as if she could no longer feel or fight..."⁹⁵ The inner disintegration culminates in stark madness, helplessness and a complete nervous breakdown. "Once she was roused by a noise, and realized it was herself, talking out loud in the living room in a low angry voice."⁹⁶ She also becomes so lethargic and helpless that it is Moses, the native servant, who has to dress her up,

⁹² *Ibid* 94-95; 183-191.

⁹³ *Ibid* 74.

⁹⁴ *Ibid* 120-125.

⁹⁵ D. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 125.

do up her buttons, comb her hair and tie it up, to the horror of Tony Marston, the youth who is hired to manage Dick's property while he and Mary go on a forced holiday.

Turner himself, being a very poor farmer, suffers, and it looks as if his fate is sealed in the love-and-hate relationship with his wife, his land and "his natives." Life is impossible for him without all three. Thus, he too, goes mad when Mary is murdered and Slatter threatens to buy his land. Symbolically he dies with Mary.

The Grass is Singing is a powerful novel which seems to have been very popular in the 1950s when it was first published: "It was reprinted seven times in five months; by 1971 the Penguin edition alone had sold 70 000 copies. Revisions at once acclaimed it as the most promising novel to have appeared in England since the Second World War and certainly it was the most successful colonial novel...."⁹⁷ One reason why the book is such a success is Lessing's form. She uses a very effective omniscient narrator to explicitly tell the story of the Turners. There are no obvious authorial intrusions as is the case in other novels where one can clearly discern the author's voice. Thorpe could not have described this form better when he says, "Lessing's method is to present relationships and an episode and allow readers the liberty of their own interpretation. In characterizing [sic] the settlers in the novel...she knows that the subject-

⁹⁶ *Ibid* 184.

⁹⁷ Michael Thorpe, *Doris Lessing's Africa* (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1978) 11.

matter itself is explicit enough.”⁹⁸ A number of examples will illustrate how Lessing does that.

In all the novels discussed in this thesis, the question of Africans or natives who smell always comes up. That question is handled expertly by Lessing through her narrator. After describing how Mary is repulsed by the African labourers’ smell, Mary herself, in seething anger, comments: “How they stink,” to which Dick replies light-heartedly with a laugh, “They say we stink.” “Nonsense!” Mary exclaims with indignant shock at the fact that “these animals should so presume.” Dick, without noticing her anger, continues, “Oh yes...I remember talking to old Samson once. He said: ‘You say we smell. But to us there is nothing worse than a white man’s smell.’”⁹⁹ Nowhere else is that subject so balanced in its presentation.

Another example is how Lessing’s servants are given Biblical names rather than the usual mocking Sixpence, Shilling type. There is Moses and Samson, at least, the only two servants identified individually. Furthermore, prejudice against natives and poor whites, like the Turners, is presented in such a way that the reader is not mistaken as to who is the prejudiced party. For instance, we know Dick’s, Mary’s and the Slatters’ thinking about natives. Mary is practically obsessed with her hatred for them, and does not believe in treating them softly. Left to herself, she would use the sjambok to discipline field workers because they make her

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 11.

⁹⁹ D. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 142.

sick!¹⁰⁰ Dick simply despises them, but is afraid that they might leave him. So he is cautious, and believes in being careful with them, in going slow.¹⁰¹ Charlie Slatter, on the other hand, is rough, and believes that no woman knows how to handle niggers.¹⁰² He, too, believes in farming with the sjambok for the natives... “He had once killed a native in a fit of temper [for which] he was fined thirty pounds.”¹⁰³

In rebuking his wife for chasing every house servant away so frequently, Dick explains that the natives “are nothing but savages after all....” The narrator comments, “Thus, Dick, who had never stopped to reflect that these same savages had cooked for him better than his wife did, had run his house, had given him a comfortable existence, as far as his pinched life could be comfortable, for years,” has the nerve to despise them so much. The narrator’s comment brings balance to Dick’s prejudicial utterances about natives, yet the reader does not feel that Lessing is lecturing him or her.

One last example is when the Turners are maligned for being poor and for refusing to mix with other whites in the District. Charlie Slatter and wife spread malicious stories and rumours about them, and pretty soon, these get out of hand, particularly the incident when Slatter gives Mary a lift on her way to the train station the day she runs away from home. The narrator then comments, “The story had by now become monstrously distorted. Mary had run away from her husband in the middle of the

¹⁰⁰ D. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 142.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid* 142.

¹⁰² *Ibid* 216.

¹⁰³ *Ibid* 15.

night because he had locked her out, had found refuge with the Slatters, had borrowed money from them to leave. Dick had come after her next morning and promised never to ill-treat her again. This was the story, told all over the district to the accompaniment of headshaking and tongue-clickings.”¹⁰⁴ Again, one does not feel the intrusion of the author’s voice but can very well imagine the juicy gossip in the “District.”

Lessing also focuses on Cecil John Rhodes’s ideology as discussed earlier in this thesis. There is, what the narrator calls, the first South African ideology that moves Charlie Slatter to act quickly to remove the Turners from “the District.” This ideology or law, dictates that “Thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are.”¹⁰⁵ With Moses working in the Turners’ home, feeding and dressing up Mary and fixing her hair, he and other black workers definitely know that these whites are even poorer than themselves. Slatter discovers their real state and panics. That is why he comes up with hasty arrangements to send the Turners off to the seacoast for six months, and to buy their land.

Rhodes’s ideas about Africans are independently projected, sometimes through some form of regret by Mary, Dick and Charlie Slatter, that “the law-makers and Civil Service...interfered with the natural right of a white farmer to treat his labour as he pleased.”¹⁰⁶ There is also the question of Moses, the “Mission boy,” whom Dick dislikes: “Dick did not like

¹⁰⁴ D. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 209-210.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid* 221.

Mission boys, they ‘knew too much.’ And in any case they should not be taught to read and write: they should be taught the dignity of labour and general usefulness to the white man.”¹⁰⁷ This sentiment comes up often as the farmers mourn that these boys generally do not want to work merely for the love of work, as the white people do. The youth, Tony Marston, possesses books on Rhodes, *Rhodes and His Influence*; *Rhodes and the Spirit of Africa*; *Rhodes and his Mission*. Again, Lessing lets her characters debate the issues, while she remains firmly in the background. This method makes her story really interesting.

One aspect that fails to come out convincingly in Lessing’s form is the motive for Mary’s murder. When Moses comes into the Turners’ home as a house servant, the reader thinks that he has come for revenge; revenge for his sjambok episode, and for Mary’s general loathing of the African—her blatant racism and hatred. But he works honestly, and behaves very respectfully towards Mary, even though she hates him so violently that at one time when he helps her to bed and tucks her coat round her legs, “she shrank into the pillow with loathing, moaning out loud, as if she had been touched by excrement.” Yet his voice is “firm and kind, like a father commanding her” to take a rest and to try to sleep so that she does not fall sick.¹⁰⁸ Throughout his tenure as a servant, Moses is not portrayed as cruel, but he murders her...perhaps out of jealousy of Tony Marston. Moses asks Mary whether she wants him, Moses, to go

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid* 148.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid* 190.

¹⁰⁸ D. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 187.

away because of the new baas.¹⁰⁹ Moses's murderous feelings are not built up enough to culminate in such a drastic act.

In the last chapter, Mary actually anticipates and, practically, wills her own death, hallucinating about the presence of Moses in every corner and, most dramatically, in the store.¹¹⁰ She *waits* for him and seeks him. When eventually he murders her, for a while the reader feels as if she is still hallucinating about him. Worse still, the newspaper announcement confirms that "no motive has been discovered [but that] it is thought he was in search of valuables."¹¹¹ Having gone through the book and knowing how barren the Turners' home is, it is a mockery to talk of Mary being murdered for "valuables." The Turners do not even possess the essentials of life! That is why this aspect can be considered the weakest point in an otherwise, very powerful novel.

The theme of Lessing's novel fits in very well with Gertrude Page's themes of the suffering females in colonial Rhodesia, as her narrator points out in one instance. This instance is when Mary complains about the poverty and hardship she is forced to endure:

"It was not the voice of Mary, the individual
(who after all already did not care so much
about the bath or whether the native stayed or went),
but the voice of the suffering female, who
wanted to show her husband she just would

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid* 233. On this point, see also Michael Thorpe, *Doris Lessing, "The Grass is Singing and Other Stories"* (Burnt Hill, Harlow: Longman, 1973) 11.

¹¹⁰ D. Lessing *The Grass is Singing* 247-248.

¹¹¹ D. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 9.

not be treated like that.”¹¹²

There is no lover, Doctor Lawson, as for Joyce Grant, or Denison, a fifty-year old playboy for Nita Dendale. Thus, Mary Turner dies from the effects of loneliness, bad treatment, and the general misery of the Rhodesian colonial wife. Angela Davis gives a good description of the boring nature of normal women's work at home when she writes,

The countless chores collectively known as "housework—cooking, washing dishes, doing laundry, making beds, sweeping, shopping, etc.—apparently consume some three to four thousand hours of the average housewife's year...[yet] it does not even account for the constant unquantifiable attention mothers must give to their children.... [A woman's] never-ending toil as a housewife rarely occasions expressions of appreciation within her family. Housework, after all, is virtually invisible...invisible, repetitive, exhausting, unproductive, uncreative—these are the adjectives which most perfectly capture the nature of housework.¹¹³

All these domestic chores described here are boring, yet basic. The reader finds him/herself agreeing with Davis's condemnation of society's lack of proper recognition and appreciation for those who have to perform these chores. Yet for Mary Turner, not even these boring chores are there to occupy her days. We just have to imagine how worse she must feel—without children and without the basic necessities in a home that would, at least, make her homemaking worthwhile. She has no shopping to do, no laundry to talk about, and nothing much to cook

¹¹² *Ibid* 96.

¹¹³ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 222.

because of grinding poverty. Furthermore, she has a husband who turns a blind eye to her material and maternal condition. It is not surprising, therefore, that she loses her sanity.

THE CYNICAL PHILOSOPHER AND THE ENTHUSIASTIC WIFE

Gertrude Page's *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy or The Dam Farm*,¹¹⁴ is a humorous novel written in the epistolary and diary form by the main character, Jill, who is also the first person narrator of events. She corresponds with her brother, Jack, who lives somewhere in a place called Quetta. She writes about her and her husband Chip's decision to go and settle in a colony, choosing Rhodesia over New Zealand because, Jill says, she has fallen in love with the name. The reason for wanting to leave England is that her husband has just inherited £2 000 from a late old uncle. In order to avoid sharing it with the taxman whom she calls the Right Honourable Lloyd George, they must "make tracks" and ship out fast. Through this chosen artistic style, Page manages to cover a lot of issues, all of which would, otherwise, be difficult to incorporate in a normal fictitious narrative.

Although the reader never sees a single letter from Jack, Jill makes sure that she informs him/her of his writing, and she repeats his questions for the reader's benefit, then goes on to answer them. In this way, she answers questions that people "back home" in Britain might have had at this time about Rhodesia. Some of the questions Jack asks include the whereabouts of Rhodesia; why the two of them are going there; why they

want to go and farm; whether the two of them have lost their senses; and having settled in Rhodesia, what they live on; what they grow; and what they make; what they eat; and so on. Jill supplies answers to these questions in the most hilarious way possible. She touches her humour with some cynicism. For example, to answer the first question, where Rhodesia is, she says, “Rhodesia is not in the middle of the Desert of Sahara; neither is it on the shore of the Dead Sea; neither, as far as I can ascertain, do they still eat missionaries there.”¹¹⁵ She then tells him—“beloved brotherkin”—that some of his questions are “somewhat asinine,” perhaps like the one on cannibalism.

The epistolary form allows Jill/Page to describe what she sees and does in as free a tone, manner and fashion as possible, because, basically, she is talking to her brother. It is a conversational type of writing, appropriately interspersed with a diary, another very personal and informal style, where Jill records experiences in the most candid fashion. The diary is also sent to the brotherkin for his information.

Sheila MacDonald also uses the epistolary form very successfully in her novel, *Sally in Rhodesia*.¹¹⁶ The novel has the same characteristics as Page’s. Sally writes to her mother who is in England about her experiences in Rhodesia, and in contrast to the cynical and philosophical Jill, she is the very enthusiastic Rhodesian wife.

¹¹⁴ Gertrude Page, *Jill’s Rhodesian Philosophy or The Dam Farm* (London: Hurst & Blackett, Ltd., 1910).

¹¹⁵ G. Page, *Jill’s Rhodesian Philosophy...* 1.

¹¹⁶ Sheila MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* with 12 illustrations (London: Heath Cranton Ltd., 1926).

We shall examine a few topics that Jill covers in her letters to Jack and in the diaries that she writes. The issue of the position of women in the colony is one such topic dealt with throughout the novel in various ways. All characters in the novel agree that women have the greatest burden in Rhodesia in attempting to cope with housework which, in most cases, they cannot carry out anyway. The most difficult areas of housework are cooking, washing, and in Jill's case, starching, and the use of blue to improve white garments. Problems are also experienced in dealing with African house servants, and with loneliness.¹¹⁷

Jill's suggested solution to the problems associated with cooking, washing, starching and similar household chores, is that the Chartered Company should give settlers a handbook which deals with such matters. She believes that this would be more useful than feeding them on numerous advertisements that harp on the elusive milk and honey in Rhodesia. In her effort to cope with loneliness and general hardship, Jill prefers to rely on the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius. It serves her better than a cookbook, she insists. There are several instances where Jill focuses on loneliness, such as in her discussion with her one female neighbour whom she calls the "writer-woman." The writer-woman tells Jill of her struggle against loneliness and how bored she gets with her own husband: "I used to feel sometimes I'd sooner see the face of any enemy I had in the world, so long as it was a different face [from her husband's]."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ G. Page, *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy...* 26.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid* 72.

The occasion of a veldt fire becomes an exhilarating experience to Jill. Although she is sorry about the destruction it causes, she says, “I was almost starved for a happening, and now at least, something was happening...it made me feel quite alive again, and I blessed the leaping fire-devil.” She even wishes it could continue to destroy the cattle boys’ huts in its path. And so she gasps on...

A road that ran between [the huts] would probably save them; but oh, how I hoped it would not! I grew more and more taut and breathless. The fire itself was not more fiendish than I, in my devouring hunger for every sensation I could squeeze from this hour of unlooked for thrills. Surely, surely the huts were doomed. With all my heart and soul I longed to see the barrier cleared, and the flames forging ahead.”¹¹⁹

The reader can almost visualise Jill’s excitement mounting with each roar and crackle of the fire as it burns on and on. At the end she experiences a cathartic effect, as if that fire has purified her:

The zenith was achieved. The flames would be quickly checked ahead; but what of that? What cared I any longer? The two huts were blackened heaps of cinders. Wanton waste?...useless labour?...fiend-like destruction?...What of it? A brain is more than a wattle-and daub hut, and mine was petrified for want of sensation. Activity possessed it immediately. I became gay, joyful, optimistic.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ G. Page, *Jill’s Rhodesian Philosophy...* 94; 95; 96.

¹²⁰ *Ibid* 97.

Jill has a very cynical attitude toward people and things, but in the fire instance, she dramatises the effect of a dull life, starved of genuine activity, on the female. She goes through the same exhilarating experience when she describes a flood and a lion hunt.¹²¹ This exhilaration is a result of having something exciting after being “deprived of many of the little things that fill up an ordinary day” if one were at home in England.¹²²

There is a difference, however, between Jill and Nita, Joyce or Mary in the previously discussed novels. The difference is that Jill’s husband, Chip, genuinely socialises with her, rather than simply abandoning her while he takes refuge in the fields. He actually entertains her by driving her to town; taking her for a walk some afternoons; or entertaining her with his other men-friends in the district, the Pal or the Soldier-man, who come over for a chat.¹²³ Chip takes her down to their orchard where she is able to see the citrus trees in bloom.¹²⁴ The couple, with friends, visits a gold mine for recreation.¹²⁵ The Soldier-man even takes her horse riding, and to see “Bushman” cave paintings of a past civilisation.¹²⁶ Furthermore, Jill is able to relax “with her head against her husband’s knee” because they share enough affection for each other, which the other women cannot do. The two are able to share quality time and laughter—

¹²¹ *Ibid* 108-112.

¹²² *Ibid* 201.

¹²³ G. Page, *Jill’s Rhodesian Philosophy* 36; 39; 67. Notice that Jill never calls people by their names—it is the Soldier-man, or the Pal, or the Politician, the Neighbour who is also the writer-woman, and so on. Her own husband she calls Chip. Even her own name and that of her brother’s are unreal, Jack and Jill. This kind of naming is consistent with her philosophical-cum-cynical character.

¹²⁴ *Ibid* 166-167.

¹²⁵ *Ibid* 216-219.

¹²⁶ *Ibid* 101-105.

side-splitting, genuine laughter at certain funny episodes. One such episode is when Colonel Stodart, the Politician, is bitten by hornets while sitting on one of their chairs. The other one is the occasion of Jill's shooting a wild pig, and then somersaulting backwards because of the force of the rifle fire.¹²⁷ Chip, therefore, is not one of the insensitive husbands and, hence, Jill is not in a desperate situation in Rhodesia, comparatively speaking.

The same relatively happy situation as Jill's is experienced by Sheila Macdonald's character, Sally, who is pleasant, very happy, and has friendly company around her. She says, "Often I go to someone else's house, oftener I have different women here. All bring their sewing, babies in prams occupy the garden and verandah, and tea and scones and cake are consumed *ad lib*. It's all so jolly, you would revel in it...After tea [I] go off with [Toby] to play tennis or golf. Home in time for a bath before dinner, when we often have someone dining with us, or else dine out ourselves."¹²⁸ After her children are born, once a week her husband remains at home babysitting while she goes to town for various types of entertainment. Her husband is a very nice man, who is sensitive and considerate. Sally, unlike Jill, does not appear to suffer from loneliness, and she has accepted her condition in Rhodesia much more embracingly than Jill.

¹²⁷ *Ibid* 79; 90; 212-213.

¹²⁸ Sheila MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 56.

One aspect that the women novelists explore thoroughly is the question of loyalty to the country and, therefore, to Empire building by Britain. In *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy*, the Neighbour/the writer-woman is the chief propagator of this Rhodesian spirit. She comes over to Jill's house to orient her into becoming a true Rhodesian. She tells Jill, "She [Rhodesia] gives you a jolly bad time first, to see if you are worth bothering about...and if you win through she suddenly turns round and smiles at you, and compensations crop up in all directions...Show Rhodesia you don't mean to be beaten and she'll end by heaping you with good things and good times."¹²⁹ This writer-woman bubbles with enthusiasm so much that she and her husband even name their daughter "Rhodesia Elizabeth;" "Desia Betty" for short.¹³⁰ She exudes such a cheerful optimism about her life in Rhodesia that Jill misses this sort of optimism sometimes. It is difficult, though, to ascertain whether Jill misses this optimism seriously or whether she is being sarcastic.¹³¹ At times like these, Jill falls back on her Philosophical Treatise to stave off the writer-woman's enthusiasm.

It is the writer-woman who also writes narratives that serenade Rhodesia. She gives them to Jill who, in turn, sends them to her brother for his information.¹³² The writer-woman further advocates more babies to boost the country's white population as she says, "For it's a sure thing what Rhodesia wants more than anything else just now is babies, babies and

¹²⁹ G. Page, *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy...* 72-73.

¹³⁰ *Ibid* 76.

¹³¹ *Ibid* 78.

¹³² G. Page, *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy...* 43-53; 189-194.

more babies.”¹³³ The writer-woman and the Gentleman Farmer, converse at length about facilities that could be put in place to ensure good recreation for women and for farmers. Jill’s comment is to the effect that she would want to see recreational facilities that would benefit “all the homesick people of either sex by halving the cost of the trip home.”¹³⁴ Physically, she is in Rhodesia but spiritually she remains at home in Britain.

The Neighbour/writer-woman hopes that Jill, eventually, will outgrow her ill-feeling about Rhodesia and become a staunch imperialist; “and settle down happily among us. You see, after all, one is achieving Empire-work here, whereas in the overcrowded spaces of England one achieves little else but pretty frocks and prowess at games.”¹³⁵

The Neighbour sees it as her duty to orient women who come to Rhodesia to love the country as the men do. So she tells Jill, “I’m a Rhodesian, and I love my country. And I want to make other women love it if I can. The men take to it naturally, like ducks to water, but most women...have to acquire their affection and I think the acquiring is often harder than it need be.” She wants the women to possess a Spartan spirit—“the kind that sacrifices the present for the future....”¹³⁶

¹³³ *Ibid* 107.

¹³⁴ *Ibid* 177-180.

¹³⁵ *Ibid* 129.

¹³⁶ *Ibid* 131.

The Neighbour, in *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy*, therefore, and Sally in *Sally in Rhodesia*, would have got along well together because Sally loves Rhodesia. She is the example of those wives who love the country. Sally bears four children, two girls and two boys, in the space of three years. She is proud of her achievement. This would have pleased Jill's Neighbour to no end. While the Neighbour writes beautiful narratives on the Rhodesian summer, rain and what she calls, "The Rhodesian Wonder Month," Sally vividly describes the Rhodesian storm—its rain, thunder and lightning.¹³⁷ The questions she has to answer about Rhodesia from her mother are similar to Jill's, even the answers she gives.

Although Jill remains non-committal while listening to the conversation between the Neighbour and the Gentleman Farmer, her love for Rhodesia surfaces when she mourns the Soldier-man who dies of fever. She believes that he dies for the cause of civilisation, and she turns this simple death from fever, into a heroic death for progress and Empire; a death, which she says, goes unnoticed and improperly recognised. She then proceeds to salute "mothers of England" who, without complaint, give up their sons and daughters for the civilising cause, and who have to endure the pain of separation and death.¹³⁸ Jill ends by expressing concern for global colonisers here in Rhodesia, and elsewhere, as she draws examples from Canada and Australia in her mourning for those who die for the colonial, Imperial cause. The Neighbour, too, believes that it is worthwhile for a good man like the Soldier-man, to die for Rhodesia—"A country like Rhodesia is 'worth while' a thousand times over, even if it

¹³⁷ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 65-66.

¹³⁸ G. Page, *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy...* 118-127.

claims useful lives”...she tells the distraught Jill... “Nothing good is to be had without paying for it; and the men who die now are paying the price for their country....”¹³⁹

Perhaps, it is from this kind of novel where readers in England get the impression that Rhodesian men are romantic and very kind. For example, Jill, on several occasions and in various ways, writes about how “most of the men in Rhodesia are kind, and probably there is a higher percentage of interesting men than in any other country in world.”¹⁴⁰ Sally also praises Rhodesian men when she says, “You all think they are a hard-drinking queer lot, too fond of their neighbour’s wife, etc. etc. Don’t judge by some of the books you read. Some there are who deserve the reputation such books have won for them, but the majority are [sic] quite the reverse. Same as our sex.”¹⁴¹ She later repeats her defence of Rhodesians when she writes:

“But I hate you or anyone else at home to judge us by such books as ‘Virginia of the Rhodesians,’ or really by any other Rhodesian book I have ever read. We are really a highly respectable community on the whole, loving our husbands and homes and babies and perfectly happy in the back blocks. ...Don’t read any more silly books, just come and see for yourself what jolly decent sober men and women the majority of us are....”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ G. Page, *Jill’s Rhodesian Philosophy...* 129.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid* 164.

¹⁴¹ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 166.

¹⁴² *Ibid* 116; 150.

This invitation to her mother to come to Rhodesia is repeated no fewer than eight times. However, the novel ends with her and the children visiting England instead.

Jill's final comment on the question of population is futuristic. She compares demographic figures for Africans and settlers and makes a note, with a disconcerting air, that "already [Africans] are about 900 to 1; and with steady development, unless the white man can keep the upper hand by sheer force of character, they must inevitably take back their country; and possibly in doing so murder every Englishman in it." In her attempt to provide a white man's solution to this demographic problem, she echoes Cripps in *Bay Tree Country*: "It is a problem for the future—a problem that will be greatly simplified if, as far as possible, reliable men of fine character hold the posts nearest in touch with natives *now*." Then Jill conveniently acknowledges that idea as the Writer-woman's... "Whenever I write bookishly, you may be sure it is something I have talked to her about."¹⁴³

Indeed, Jill remains philosophical right up to the end. As a result, she needs no extra-marital affair to ease her boredom.¹⁴⁴ By the end of the

¹⁴³ G. Page, *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy...* 220-221.

¹⁴⁴ Jill quotes Marcus Aurelius whenever she confronts a problem. For example she believes that given a choice of purchasing a cookery book and a philosophy book, she would go for the latter and she actually does that. For "a cookery book is of small service if you have almost nothing to cook, whereas a book on Philosophy can enable you to attain to a frame of mind in which you may imagine food where no food is, and persuade yourself a crust of bread in Rhodesian sunshine is better than a stalled ox in a London fog" (64). So she quotes, "*If thou art pained by any external thing it is not this thing that disturbs thee, but thy judgement about it, and it is in thy power to wipe out this judgement now*" (64-65). When her "cook boy" ruins her dissert by spreading mustard instead of custard on her trifle, she is almost in tears but is rescued by Marcus Aurelius. So she reads, "*As a piggie that cryes and flings when his throat is cut, phancie to thyself everyone to bee, that grieves for any worldly thing, and takes on*" (92). These passages strengthen and console her and she even passes the wisdom onto her husband after a fire destroys his heap of hay. She quotes him Epictetus: "*Seek not to have things*

novel she is still attempting to be Rhodesian, but has not accomplished that feat yet. Symbolically, that is evident when she leaves Rhodesia for England. She announces her pregnancy to her brother, who is also going to get married, though he does not promise to visit Rhodesia. Jill explains her reason for visiting England at this time, by saying that she does it in the same “spirit that makes the Englishman glad he was born at home, wish to be married at home and ask to be buried at home.”¹⁴⁵ This attitude is unlike the Neighbour’s or Sally’s.

In contrast, Sally pronounces a love-at-first-sight for Africa and for Rhodesia as she tells her mother in her first letter. In her second letter she says that she is an enthusiastic Rhodesian already, in spite of waking up from an afternoon nap one day face to face with a black mamba.¹⁴⁶ She ends the second letter with an invitation to all those who want to be happy, to come to Rhodesia.¹⁴⁷ In one of her letters she signs herself, “the most domesticated and virtuous wife in Rhodesia...”¹⁴⁸

Even when Sally visits England at the end of the novel, she makes it clear that she is not going to stay. She tells her mother not to imagine that she can keep them in England, “for Toby and I and hundreds of others like us mean to live, and bring up our children in the land we have learnt to

happen as you choose them, but rather choose them to happen as they do, and so shall you live prosperously” (98). This is why Page’s title for this book is *Jill’s Rhodesian Philosophy*. “*Or the Dam Farm*” is added on because Jill changes the name of their farm from Woodlands to Dam farm because they have a dam on it and because that new name is less English. By contrast, MacDonald’s Sally finds a cook book very useful and very handy.

¹⁴⁵ G. Page, *Jill’s Rhodesian Philosophy...* 230.

¹⁴⁶ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 34.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid* 35.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid* 86.

love.”¹⁴⁹ Earlier, in a statement that is repeated in different words by Peter Rimmer, in his novel, *Cry of the Fish Eagle*, Sally describes the grip that Rhodesia has on the settlers:

I know if I went home for a trip now, I would be longing for my Rhodesian hill-top in no time, for there is no doubt about it, the place gets a grip on one, and it seems, no matter how definitely anyone shakes the dust of Rhodesia from their feet, and retires on a pension to live happily in England ever after, they invariably reappear. It's the sun that is responsible I think, also the society, for we really are a very jolly small community.¹⁵⁰

The implication is that Rhodesia holds a special charm for white people.

The last issue that Jill focuses on is the issue of African servants and her relationship with them. At best, she is highly cynical or sarcastic about them, and at worst, she is downright insulting. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this attitude.

When Jill and her husband arrive in Rhodesia for the first time, they ride a mule from Salisbury to their farm. She explains that a native of a particularly “odorous type” drives the mule. We have to remember that while they ride, the *odorous* native walks the whole way, and a “smaller one, ran alongside the mules, the better to induce them to trot.”¹⁵¹ On this same subject of the African odour, Sally writes to her mother, “Nearly all

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid* 224.

¹⁵⁰ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 161.

¹⁵¹ G. Page, *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy...* 19.

the boys have a horrid odour, unless one makes them wash with carbolic soap everyday. Toby calls the odour ‘eau d’Afrique’ and so it is—one just has to lump it together with the mosquitoes and flies and fleas and bugs and ants of every description, and remember that in spite of it all, Rhodesia is perfect.”¹⁵²

When Jill asks the “cook boy” whose name is Shilling, whether there were ingredients for cake making, she says that “He shook his head and glared defiantly, from which I gathered that he did not understand English, and I might as well address the dog.”¹⁵³ The language barrier is, of course, to be expected. On what they eat, Jill says, “we had bully beef twice today,...it tastes like boiled red string flavoured with Kaffir...we finished off with our old friends bread and treacle, however, and tea flavoured with nigger.” She is also “horribly afraid, that as a last resource [for soup, the niggers] just boil the dirty kitchen cloths, and flavour the result with Worcestershire Sauce.” This is an actual possibility, since the two races are poised in subtle antagonism against each other.¹⁵⁴

Jill calls natives, “comical creatures,” and describes Tambo, her houseboy, as one who is “as ugly as sin [and] as vain as a peacock.” She cannot recognise the cook-boy’s child as a baby, because it “looked like a very inflated, black India-rubber ball.”¹⁵⁵ After admiring the cave paintings of the San people, she agrees that the art is intriguing and

¹⁵² S. MacDonald, 86.

¹⁵³ G. Page, *Jill’s Rhodesian Philosophy...* 29.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid* 31; 32; 33.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid* 48-49.

incomprehensible and, therefore, proclaims an ancient civilisation. Yet she continues to deride the people who produced that art, insisting that the people were little savages, and that she is in “a wilderness...a vast untamed country, inhabited by uncivilised beings which [nevertheless] gripped and held her imagination.”¹⁵⁶ The contradictions are self-evident.

Sally also discusses these paintings and calls them “Kaffir paintings,” which she and Toby go to see at a place called “The Six mile Sprwit.” She describes what they see as follows: “The paintings are of animals, done in reddish paint on rocks, and are really quite wonderful. No one knows what tribe or race did them or at least I don’t think they do. There was a race of people in Rhodesia once, and we just call them ‘the ancients,’ who carried out extensive mining operations all over the country. Wherever one goes over the veldt one can see ‘Ancient workings’ where gold mining was once carried on.”¹⁵⁷ Sally acknowledges that these people exported a lot of gold, and that current gold mines are a continuation of these ancient workings. She, therefore, indirectly acknowledges the existence of a former, vibrant civilisation in this country, now called Rhodesia.

At the time that Page is writing, doubts abound as to whether Africans in this Southern African territory could have been conscious enough to mine and trade in gold. That is why those doubts of historical events surface in this novel, reflecting the thinking of the time. Writing in 1923 “on the eve of Rhodesia’s assumption of Responsible Government after some 33

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid* 101-102.

¹⁵⁷ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 128-129.

years of Charter Company administration,” Ethel Tawse Jollie expresses the same doubts about who could have mined gold before the white people came to this territory when she says,

It is rather a rueful reflection to the modern Rhodesian that before he began to exploit the minerals of the country, gold to the amount of some seventy-five to one hundred and fifty millions had been extracted. At what period and by whom this was done forms a fascinating historical problem which still remains in the realm of conjecture. The evidences of a large and semi-civilised population having lived and worked throughout the territory are not confined to one class of ruin, but include terraces, aqueducts, pits and underground passages as well as the better known remains of temples and fortresses. These have provided material for disputes between archaeologists, and for many interesting monographs and books of description, but the result is chiefly a theory of possibilities.¹⁵⁸

It seems painful to Jollie and other Rhodesians to admit that there were people before them who had a serious civilisation, and who were responsible for this gold mining. They prefer, instead, to call it a “semi-civilisation” of unknown persons.

Another characteristic of the time, is the constant comparison between the “useless” Shona who “can’t even walk straight if you peg a line along the ground for them,” and any of the other ethnic groups far away from Mashonaland. In *Jill’s Rhodesian Philosophy*, that comparison is made by the Neighbour, who prefers the Nyasas (Malawians) or the boys from the North, who, not only wash regularly, but are also praised for being so

¹⁵⁸ Ethel Tawse Jollie, M.L.A., *The Real Rhodesia* (Bulawayo: Books of Rhodesia 1971. Rhodesiana Reprint Library Volume Nineteen, Facsimile reproduction of the 1924 edition) 10.

good that one of them used to wash his glass and tea cloths every day and put them neatly away without being told.¹⁵⁹ This is the usual attempt to despise the Shona people, while propagating the myth that all the other African ethnic groups are better than they are. For this same reason, Sally's better workers are all foreigners from Nyasaland (Malawi), for example, Elijah, her "dream cook," as she calls him, is from a Blantyre Presbyterian Mission.¹⁶⁰ Another one, Pudding, comes from Tete in Mozambique.¹⁶¹

A description of the "boys'" eating habits by Jill, will further indicate the inherent prejudice of the time. She says: "Each [boy] then takes a handful of mealie meal, pats and squeezes it into a filthy-looking lump, and sort of shoots it into his mouth at one fell swoop."¹⁶² The "lump" need not have been described as "filthy-looking" since it is made of ordinary mealie-meal.

African music is described as a "hideous, droning sound," which, nevertheless, "suits the country in some fanciful way...."¹⁶³ African sleeping habits are correctly described actually, but the description ends with the idea that their feet do not feel pain: "Occasionally a foot comes in contact with a hot cinder, but the boy, as far as I can ascertain, merely wonders if it is a mosquito, and goes on sleeping."¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ G. Page, *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy...* 134; 135; 136; 156.

¹⁶⁰ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 63.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid* 217.

¹⁶² G. Page, *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy...* 156.

¹⁶³ *Ibid* 170.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid* 171.

When Jill and friends tour the gold mine, she says “there wasn’t much to see except burrowings in the earth, and staring, grinning, surly-looking niggers that made you feel as if you had strayed by chance into some suburban region of Hades.”¹⁶⁵ Sally summarises her opinion of Africans when she writes to her mother, “ I don’t hate the negro, I quite like him, as a servant, an animal, a beast of burden, and I treat him kindly and properly, as do all decent people in this country....”¹⁶⁶

We may explain this general white attitude to Africans in the words of Winthrop D. Jordan who writes:

As with skin colour, English reporting of African customs was partly an exercise in self-inspection by means of comparison. The English yardstick of course tended to emphasize the differences between the two groups, but it also made for heightened sensitivity to instances of similarity. Thus the Englishman’s ethnocentrism tended to distort his perception of African culture in two opposite directions. While it led him to emphasize differences and to condemn... deviations from the English norm, it led him also to seek out similarities... Very few similarities are reported in these letters as Africans are generally regarded as savages.¹⁶⁷

Occasionally, however, the “boys” get their own back and novelists do not miss the opportunity to portray that aspect of colonial life. For instance, Jill’s “cook and house boys” go to the river to wash their garments at 12:30 p.m., precisely the lunchtime that they should be

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid* 218.

¹⁶⁶ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 180.

¹⁶⁷ Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man’s Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United State* 13.

preparing lunch for her special guests. Instead of spreading custard on the trifle for the desert, Jill's cook spreads mustard. Since the madam does not seem to know much about cooking either, the mustard error is discovered when the Politician's wife begins to choke on the trifle.¹⁶⁸

In Sally's case, she and her husband, Toby, come home unexpectedly one day, only to find Tom sleeping in *her* bed.¹⁶⁹ Whiskey, Sally's cook boy, also ruins Sally's special dinner by putting in an extra amount of pea flour in her consommé, claiming that those were her instructions to him. Sixpence, the houseboy, on the other hand, turns up wearing Sally's best-embroidered garment. He too claims that she "had told him to put on *my* very best white limbo for the occasion," and so he obliges. Tiki, Sally's cook boy, who lasts only three days on the job, goes to the extent of boiling dirty tea cloths and serving the water as soup to the master and mistress. When asked why he does that, his response is that since the Missus tells him to boil the cloths in water, why not use the same good clean water for meat and vegetables to save unnecessary work!¹⁷⁰

It is possible that these natives do all these things deliberately. Since whites want the image of a dumb African, they decide to perfect that image and give it back to them. After all, this is the image of the black man that lives up to a white audience's racist notion abroad.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ G. Page, *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy...* 91.

¹⁶⁹ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 17.

¹⁷⁰ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 27-28; 62.

¹⁷¹ Bell Hooks, *Yearning: race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1990) 2. See discussion of a similar situation where Walter Lee, a black male character in Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* is "portrayed as a crazed, angry, dangerous black man;" and Bell Hooks comments, "Gone was Walter Lee as symbolic black 'yearning;' in its place stood the isolated male terrorist, an image lived up to a white audience's racist notions of contemporary black masculinity." The same image of Africans is portrayed in these novels to satisfy such white

Paulo Freire discusses the same issue that sometimes approximates an acute sense of inferiority. He says:

So often do they [the oppressed people] hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.¹⁷²

One way of interpreting this negative attitude of the white people toward the blacks is to say that Page and MacDonald want to be informative to their readers about the condition of the native. However, they succeed in giving that information in a manner that degrades the African; that buttresses and promotes the racist attitudes of the day.

MacDonald deals with the issue of passes, and the consequences of having none. One such description occurs in an episode where Whisky is arrested for overstaying at a friend's *kia* without a pass. His sentence, handed down by a Magistrate, is a fine of £4, or a month's imprisonment. Sally's husband, Toby, pays the fine, which means that Whisky has to do without his monthly wage of £1-10 until the debt is paid. Before it is completed, Whisky is caught entertaining "two large and oily lady friends in his *kia*," using Sally's best tea cloth, her silver teapot and sugar basin for the occasion. For this misdemeanour, Whisky is thoroughly beaten

notions of the African. See also the play itself, Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Signet-Penguin Group, 1958 reprinted 1959; 1966; 1984; 1987; 1988).

¹⁷² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968) 49.

with a sjambok by Toby, and Sally is so infuriated by the cook's behaviour that his "howls...were as music to [her] ears!"¹⁷³ Evidently, Whisky's behaviour is prompted by both poverty and frustration.

There is a distortion in *Sally in Rhodesia* concerning the issue of *roora/lobola*. Sally writes home to say that Sixpence, her house boy, is leaving because "he has saved up fifteen pounds and is going home to buy a cheap wife [for about three cows] and an expensive one [for about ten to twelve cows]."¹⁷⁴ Instead of describing what the African marriage customs are, Sally prefers to write about the purchase of wives, which definitely sounds strange to her mother's ears back in England. At one time Whisky proudly announces the birth of his daughter by his wife whom he has not seen for three years. He does not appear to suspect adultery. This gives the impression that the African is so dumb that he cannot figure out such a simple equation.

All this information is meant to downgrade the Africans. Anyone coming to Rhodesia at this time, who has read this kind of story, would automatically be prejudiced against them. Even when Sally and Toby are given hospitality by a Chief whom Sally calls, "a revolting fat old Kaffir," after their horse runs away, she still describes that offer of shelter and food for the night, in derogatory terms.¹⁷⁵ She sneers at African hospitality.

¹⁷³ S. MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia* 42-43.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid* 135.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid* 120-122.

While Jill, in 1910, has to rely on Philosophy to ward off frustration and loneliness, Sally, in 1907-1912 learns to cook, with the help of Mrs. Beaton's cookbook. She produces very good meals, cakes and breads. The difference is in personalities. Sally is much more cheerful and enjoys being Rhodesian more than Jill could ever do. Sally even sends photographs home.

In both novels by Page and MacDonald, however, we do not have a detailed description of the men's work. This is because the authors write strictly a woman's story from the woman's point of view. The men are mentioned as they interact with the two women, Jill and Sally, who write informative letters to people who do not visit Rhodesia. As mentioned earlier, although the two women visit home at the end of the novels, they both intend to return to beloved Rhodesia. Jill is a cynical, philosophical woman, while Sally is an enthusiastic woman who loves Rhodesia.

CONCLUSION:

The works discussed in this chapter show that female writers pay attention to those issues that affect colonial women as they struggle to cope with life in early Rhodesia. The novels are not only entertaining, but also informative and insightful. They highlight the typical Rhodesian culture of despising the Africans whose only use for the white people is to render service to them. Women complement their men in advancing the cause of colonising Rhodesia for Empire building. While strong women triumph in their colonising efforts, weaker ones become victims and succumb to the tremendous pressures that are demanded by the

situations they find themselves in. This comes through eloquently in the way the authors weave together their material to bring out meaning.

The next chapter focuses on various other topics and concerns that are found in some of the Rhodesian novels.