

The Jewel of Africa by Doris Lessing

Internationally acclaimed author Doris Lessing, 83, grew up on a farm in Southern Rhodesia, an experience which inspired her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*. She was a fierce critic of racial injustice under white rule in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa and in 1956 was banned from both countries. Here she contemplates Zimbabwe's tragedy. "Nothing," she writes of Robert Mugabe, "is more astonishing than the silence about him for so many years among liberals and well-wishers - the politically correct. What crimes have been committed in the name of political correctness. A man may get away with murder, if he is black. Mugabe did, for many years."

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The Jewel of Africa

By Doris Lessing

"You have the jewel of Africa in your hands," said President Samora Machel of Mozambique and President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania to Robert Mugabe, at the moment of independence, in 1980. "Now look after it." Twenty-three years later, the "jewel" is ruined, dishonored, disgraced. Southern Rhodesia had fine and functioning railways, good roads; its towns were policed and clean. It could grow anything, tropical fruit like pineapples, mangoes, bananas, plantains, pawpaws, passion fruit, temperate fruits like apples, peaches, plums. The staple food, maize, grew like a weed and fed surrounding countries as well. Peanuts, sunflowers, cotton, the millets and small grains that used to be staple foods before maize, flourished. Minerals: gold, chromium, asbestos, platinum, and rich coalfields. The dammed Zambezi River created the Kariba Lake, which fed electricity north and south. A paradise, and not only for the whites. The blacks did well, too, at least physically. Not politically: it was a police state and a harsh one. When the blacks rebelled and won their war in 1979 they looked forward to a plenty and competence that existed nowhere else in Africa, not even in South Africa, which was bedeviled by its many mutually hostile tribes and its vast shantytowns. But paradise has to have a superstructure, an infrastructure, and by now it is going, going - almost gone. One man is associated with the calamity, Robert Mugabe. For a while I wondered if the word "tragedy" could be applied here, greatness brought low, but Mugabe, despite his early reputation, was never great; he was always a frightened little man. There is a tragedy, all right, but it is Zimbabwe's. Mugabe is now widely execrated, and rightly, but blame for him began late. Nothing is more astonishing than the silence about him for so many years among liberals and well-wishers - the politically correct. What crimes have been committed in the name of political correctness. A man may get away with murder, if he is black. Mugabe did, for many years.

Early in his regime, we might have seen what he was when the infamous Fifth Brigade, thugs from North Korea, hated by blacks and whites alike, became Mugabe's bodyguards, and did his dirty work, notably when he attempted what was virtually genocide of thousands of the Ndebele people (the second-largest tribe) in Matabeleland. Hindsight gives us a clear picture of his depredations: at the time mendacity ruled, all was confusion. But the fact was, we knew the Fifth Brigade: it had already murdered and raped. It was confusion, too, because Mugabe seemed to begin well. He was a Marxist, true, but like other politicians before and since he said the right things, for instance, that blacks and whites must flourish together. And he passed a law against corruption, forbidding the top echelons of officials from owning more than one property. When his officials only laughed, and bought farm after farm, hotels, businesses, anything they could grab, he did nothing. It was at that point that everyone should have said, "This is no strongman, he is a weakling." From the start Mugabe has been afraid to show his face out of doors without outriders, guards, motorcades - all the defenses of paranoia. When Queen Elizabeth visited, refused to ride with him in an armored car, and insisted on an open one, people jeered as the frightened man clung to the sides of the car while the insouciant sovereign smiled and waved.

Here is the heart of the tragedy. Never has a ruler come to power with more goodwill from his people. Virtually everybody, the people who voted for him and the ones who did not, forgot their differences and expected from him the fulfillment of their dreams - and of his promises. He could have done practically anything in those early years. When you traveled around the villages in the early Eighties you heard from everyone, "Mugabe will do this.... Comrade Mugabe will do that...." He will see the value of this or that plan, build this shop or clinic or road, help us with our school, check that bullying official. If Mugabe had had the sense to trust what he heard, he could have

transformed the country. But he did not know how much he was trusted, because he was too afraid to leave his self-created prison, meeting only sycophants and cronies, and governing through inflexible Marxist rules taken from textbooks. Someone allowed into his presence who came looking for evidence of Mugabe's reputation as a well-read man would have found only Marxist tracts. He had come to Marxism late, converted by the Mozambique independence leader Samora Machel, who was a sensible, large-minded man, unlike Mugabe, who tended to be narrowly doctrinaire. (Machel was murdered by the South African secret police in 1986.) There are those who blame Mugabe's wife Sally, from Ghana, for what seemed like a change in his personality. She was, this Mother of the Nation, corrupt and unashamed of it. Departing the country for a trip home to Ghana and stopped at customs with the equivalent of a million pounds' worth of Zimbabwean money, she protested it was her money, and only laughed when she had to leave it and travel on without. But that was when laws were still enforced.

Mugabe gave refuge to the brutal dictator Mengistu from Ethiopia - he is still there, safe from the people who would try him as a war criminal. And excuses were being made, as always. Mugabe had been in a brutal prison under Ian Smith, the repressive prime minister of Rhodesia, who refused him permission to attend his son's funeral. He had experienced nothing soft and kind from the whites: Why should he now show kindness? As for Mengistu, well, it was in the finest tradition of chivalrous hospitality to shelter refugees from justice. Mugabe became a close friend of Mahathir bin Mohammed, the infamous prime minister of Malaysia, and attempted to sell him a controlling interest in Zimbabwe's electricity, but the quid pro quo was not enough and the deal fell through. In the early Nineties there was a savage drought in Zimbabwe. When members of Mugabe's government sold the grain from the silos and pocketed the money, by then the popular contempt for these ministers was such that the crime was seen as just another little item of a much larger criminal record. United Nations officials were saying as early as the mid-Eighties that Mugabe's government was the most rapacious bunch of thieves in Africa. Well, said his defenders, often members of his bureaucracy, corruption was not unknown in Europe. The secret police were arbitrary and bullying? "But you can't expect democracy of the European type in Africa."

If you visited Zimbabwe after Mugabe took control and met only the whites and blacks who hardly ever leave Harare or Bulawayo, you heard laments for the corruption, the incompetence, the general collapse of services. But if you took the trouble to visit the villages then it was impossible not to be inspired by the people. The Shona are a sane, humorous, enterprising people, but they have a fault: they are too patient. I have heard a famous Zimbabwean writer complain: What is wrong with us? We put up with you whites far too long and now we are putting up with this gang of crooks. The villagers joked about their oppressors, and continued to dream about better times, which they were only too ready to help bring into being by their own efforts. In the early years, promised free primary and secondary and university education, they were helping to build schools, unpaid, though soon free education or, in some places, any education at all would be a memory. For education, they did much better under the whites. Denied a decent education, or any, they hungered for books. At least two surveys said that what they wanted was novels, particularly classics, science fiction, poetry, historical fiction, fairy stories, and while at the beginning these were books that were supplied, soon rocketing inflation made it impossible to buy anything but the cheapest and locally published instruction books. *How to Run a Shop. How to Keep Poultry. Car Repairs.* That kind of thing. A box of even elementary books may transform a village. A box of books, sent by a humanitarian organization, may be, often is, greeted with tears. One man complained, "They taught us how to read, but now there are no books." Three years ago a Penguin classic cost more than a month's wage.

But even with books that were so far from what was originally dreamed of, in no time study classes began, literacy classes, math lessons, citizenship classes. The appearance of a box of books released (will release again?) astonishing energies. A village sunk in apathy will come to life overnight. This is not a people who wait for handouts: a little encouragement, help, sets them off on all kinds of projects. In January I heard from a member of a book team with which I'm associated that distributes books in villages, "I was out this week. I was talking about books to people who haven't eaten for three days." And there it is, the tragedy, one that could not have happened if Mugabe had been even half the man people took him for. People say, "Get rid of Mugabe and we will get back on course." But he has created a whole caste of greedy people like himself. Get rid of him and there will be others as bad. If this is the merest pessimism and the crooks can be got rid of, then there will remain the damage that has been done. Sometimes an adage dulled with age comes startlingly to life. "There is a tide in the affairs of men...." Had Mugabe ridden the tide that was running at Independence, Zimbabwe could have been an example to all of Africa. But he didn't, and the shallows and the miseries are there as evidence. Nothing can now recover that opportunity. Those of us who are old enough can only mourn lost possibilities. Familiar words carry a history lesson as sharp as

the bitterest experience. There are indeed tides that will never repeat themselves. The racial hatred that Mugabe has fomented will not die. Throughout the period from Independence onward, beginning in 1980, anti-white rhetoric went alongside the Marxist slogans that were as primitive as they would be if Marxism had been invented in Zimbabwe. Yet what everyone remarked on was the amiable race relations, friendliness between whites and blacks, compared to South Africa, where apartheid created such a bitter legacy. Fiery articles in the government press were read in the same perfunctory way as were the public pronouncements of the Soviet government, or any Communist government. The official rhetoric in Zimbabwe was worse than anywhere in Africa - so said a United Nations report. "Never has rhetoric had so little to do with what actually went on."

This anti-white rhetoric was directed at whites generally, but particularly at the white farmers, who owned sizable tracts of land and were growing most of the food and earning Zimbabwe's foreign currency. They were well aware of their anomalous position, and the Commercial Farmers Union, the organization representing white farmers and some black ones, was putting forward proposals for a redistribution of land that would not disrupt the economy. Not one of these proposals was ever even acknowledged by Mugabe. Meanwhile farms that had already been acquired by the government were not being turned over to the poor blacks; that happened only at the beginning. They were being acquired by Mugabe's greedy cronies. Why then, when there was no need for confrontation, did Mugabe unexpectedly launch an attack on the white farmers, in a clear attempt to drive them from the country? Mugabe had enjoyed seeing himself as the senior black leader in southern Africa: he did so at a time when he was increasingly seen as an embarrassment. When Nelson Mandela appeared and became the world's sweetheart, Mugabe, according to many accounts, was furious. There were ridiculous scenes where Mugabe imagined he was establishing himself as first in importance. At lunchtime during a conference of African leaders, Mandela got in line with everyone else at the buffet, while Mugabe sat at a table that had been moved so that it would be prominent in the room, and had his followers bring dishes to him. This made everyone laugh at him; but surrounded by flatterers, he never understood why people were laughing.

He became desperate to establish himself as the Great Leader. The issue of land had always rankled, not least because during the War of Liberation in the 1970s he had promised land to "every man, woman, and child." Why had he made such foolish and impossible promises? Ah, but then it was by no means certain that he would come first in the race to be leader. But now he, Mugabe, the great statesman, the father of his people, would throw out the white farmers, and Mandela, that paltry figure, would be forgotten. And in some backward parts of Africa, and other places, he became famous. He did so at the price of ruining his country, already so misgoverned by his regime that it was on the edge of collapse. And there remains an unanswered question: Why did he act so destructively? Mugabe isn't stupid. His cunning as he established his position showed a scheming, guileful man. For instance, the war in the Congo, which impoverished Zimbabwe when it was already on its knees, enriched him personally with the loot he got from its mines in return for his sending troops. And it enabled him to buy off his greatest threat, the army officers who are the only force that can dislodge him. Many people said he was mad - I among them. But perhaps one has to be a sentimental liberal to doubt that a leader, particularly one so prolific with resounding onward-and-upward rhetoric, could be making plans that would ruin his people. Did he really not foresee what his campaign of forcible acquisition of land would achieve? A friend of mine, meeting a former friend, black, a Mugabe crony, in the street, was told, "We never meant things to get out of hand like this" - this was spoken casually as if about some unimportant failure. "The trouble is that Robert can think of nothing but Tony Blair. He is convinced Blair wants to ruin him, even kill him." It is true that Blair has been critical of Mugabe, but, as my friend said, "I doubt whether Tony Blair thinks of Mugabe for as much as half a minute a week." "Ah, but Robert would not like to believe that," was the answer.

Now, with hindsight, it is easy to recall scenes and events that spelled danger. First, and above all, there were the masses of unemployed black youths. Anywhere in Zimbabwe, along the roads, in distant villages, outside schools and colleges and missions, were very young black men just standing about, or more often trying to sell pitiful carvings of wooden beasts - elephants and giraffes and so forth. Also, some sculptures. Zimbabwe has some fine black sculptors. Typical of the magical thinking that has always bedeviled Zimbabwe were such statements as "If he can make all that money from carving stone figures, then so can I." There are places in Zimbabwe where sculptures cover acres. Most of it is rubbish. The youths had no future because Mugabe's promises had come to nothing; they were hungry and idle. It was these youths that Mugabe paid to harass and take over the white farms (and the richer black farms too) in the name of the war veterans. And they are still hanging around, brutalized, drunk, and futureless, because if they have acquired a little plot of land, they have no equipment, or seeds, or, above all, skills.

Many have already drifted back to town. They are heard to complain, "We did all these bad things for Comrade Mugabe but now he has forgotten us."

Another scene: it is 1982, two years after Independence, and there is still a sullen, raw, bitter postwar mood. But in an inn, formerly a white drinking hole, in the mountains above the town of Mutare a group of young black people are dressed for a night out. The men are in dinner jackets, the girls in dance dresses. They look like an advertisement in a glossy magazine from the Thirties. Nothing could be more incongruous in this homely rural setting, which has probably never before seen a dinner jacket or a décolleté in its life. But they are thinking that this is what the long war was about. Here they are in a hotel, formerly a white enclave, dressed to the nines - just like the whites, drinking fancy drinks, and, above all, waited on, like the whites, by black menials. For the ninety years of white occupation, the blacks, most of them roughly torn from their village life, had watched - unreachably above them - rich whites with their cars and their black servants. The white people they saw as rich included many poor ones, but most blacks were so far below an apparently cohesive white layer that they could see only riches. Effortless riches. Take the example of a white youth who left home in Britain because of unemployment during the depression of the 1930s and went to work as an assistant to an established farmer. Before he tried for a loan to make the gamble on farming on his own account, he was a man without more than his clothes; the family in Britain was probably only too pleased to get rid of him. To the black waiter who served that young man beer at a district Sports Day he seemed like some rich apparition for whom everything was possible. The whites were all rich. And the most enticing of the dreams, the unobtainable dreams, was the life of the white farmer, the life of the verandas. When they thought of Mugabe's promise during the War of Liberation, that everyone would have land, this is what they wanted. A house like a white farmer's, the spreading acres, the black menials - effortless ease.

A fact about the white farmers that must be recorded is that most of them were very good farmers, inventive, industrious, with an ability to make do and mend, even when Mugabe would not allow the import of spare parts, supplies, sufficient gasoline. To visit a white farm was to be taken around by people proud of their resourcefulness. "I invented this," one of them might say, referring to a process in the curing of tobacco or a bit of machinery. There was the farmer's wife who made a cottage industry out of delicious crystallized preserves from the gourds the cattle eat. Many built up their farms from nothing - from raw bush. By the Nineties their attitude toward their black employees was changing. I was brought up with the unregenerate white farmers of the early times. At best they had maternal and paternal attitudes toward blacks, running basic clinics or elementary schools. At worst they were brutal. Because of the enforced exodus of the white farmers, attempts are being made now to soften their history. This won't work; too much has been written and recorded about their domination of blacks. But visiting them in the late Eighties or the Nineties, I found that they were, most of them, making attempts to change. As the collapse of the country worsens, few, however, can resist saying, "We told you so. We always said they couldn't run a bicycle shop, let alone a country." Such remarks come from people who had made sure there was not merely a glass ceiling but a steel one, preventing blacks from rising, from getting education and experience. In old Southern Rhodesia, when there were too many blacks on the voters' roll for the whites' comfort, the qualifications for voters were adjusted upward to exclude them. At Zambia's independence celebrations, I saw a district commissioner radiant with malicious delight because the black newcomers had mismanaged a minor aspect of the festivities. Not very nice people, some of the white settlers and administrators. But changing. Alan Paton, in *Cry the Beloved Country*: "...By the time they have come to loving, we will have come to hating."

The reporting of the transfer of farmland has been biased. All the emphasis has been on the white farmers who are losing their land. Not nearly enough has been said about the hundreds of thousands of black farm workers who lost their work and their homes, and also were beaten up (and are still being beaten up), their wives raped, and their daughters too. Well-off black farmers - some assisted by their white neighbors - and more modest black farmers have had their land taken from them. A key fact, hardly mentioned, is that since Independence 80 percent of the farms have changed hands, and under the law they had to be offered first to the government, which refused them. Mugabe's rhetoric about white farmers grabbing land from the blacks is contradicted by this fact. As a result of his campaign of misinformation, moreover, you meet people who will tell you, "The whites threw my grandparents off their farm and took their house." At the time of the whites' arrival in the area that is now Zimbabwe there were a quarter of a million blacks, and they lived in villages of mud-walled, grass-roofed huts. The women grew pumpkins and the maize imported from South America, and gathered plants from the bush. The men hunted. When I was a girl you met the men walking through the bush, dressed in animal skins, carrying assegais, people a step or two up from hunter-gatherers. On a BBC program you hear a young woman, in all sincerity, saying that the playing of the *mbira*

(thin strips of metal on a sounding gourd, which whites called the hand piano) was formerly forbidden under white rule. Yet when I was growing up the tinkling of the hand piano could be heard everywhere, including black villages. It will take a long time for Mugabe's version of history to be corrected, if it ever is.

He has recently set up compulsory indoctrination classes in villages throughout the country, mostly for teachers, but for other officials too, where they are taught that they should worship Mugabe and be totally obedient to Zanu, the ruling party. All the ills of Zimbabwe are said to be caused by machinations of Tony Blair in cahoots with the opposition parties. The students learn useful skills like how to murder opponents with a blow to sensitive parts of the body, and how to strangle them with bootlaces. This type of sadistic cruelty is not part of their own traditions and history, to which lip service is continually paid. Many blacks I've talked to and heard about do not like their own history, although they talk about "our customs." In fact, many I have seen and known cannot wait to wear dance dresses, behave like whites, live the white life, put the bush far behind them. A group of sophisticated, urban blacks will make sentimental remarks about photographs of a traditional village, but they haven't been near their villages for years. If you want to see just how much "our customs" really mean, then visit the park in Harare on Saturday or Sunday, where dozens of wedding groups arrive, the brides in flouncy white and veils, with bridesmaids and pages. The woman may be very pregnant, or with several small children. But this rite of passage into the modern world, the white man's wedding, they must have, and the photographers are there to preserve the beautiful sight for posterity. (It should perhaps be asked why a ritual invented by middle-class Victorians should have conquered the world from Japan to the Virgin Islands.) In fact, "our customs" are strongly valued when they have to do with the subjection of women. The law of the land may say one thing on paper - Zimbabwe's early Marxist phase, as in other Communist countries, imposed many kinds of equality. But "our customs" still make sure that a woman has no right to the money she has earned, or to her children. She is her husband's vassal. When Mugabe was met at the airport by hand-clapping and kowtowing maidens, and he was criticized (in the early days) for this sign of backwardness, the reply was "it is our custom." A man in a three-piece suit, in a government job, will still beat his wife - or try to; the women are fighting back. And he will consult soothsayers and shamans. Superstition still rules. It is "our custom" to look for the evil eye when a family member gets sick or a cow falls lame and then pay the witch doctor to exact revenge. It is becoming "our custom" to try to find virgin partners if you are HIV-positive, for to have sex with them will cure you of AIDS. (AIDS has spread widely in Zimbabwe.) The use of human parts in medicine goes on; it is the custom.

By now the expulsion of the white farmers is nearly complete. It should be evident that what we have been seeing is not principally about race; it is a transfer of property. Many of the poor people who settled on white land have been thrown off again by powerful blacks. Those still there may grow maize and pumpkins and the plant called rape on their patches—when it rains, that is. There is a bad drought again. The poor settlers are farming without machinery or even, in some cases, basic implements, such as shovels. The irrigation systems have broken down. I remember another prophetic scene from the Eighties: a water tank of a certain school was not working. A valve had gone. No one replaced it. The women went back to getting water from the river, which was infested with bilharzia. Two years later the water tank had not been mended. The recent settlers who had depended on Mugabe ("Comrade Mugabe will look after us"; "Comrade Mugabe will...") have no chance of getting their children into school because school (unlike under the whites) costs a lot of money; and how will they get money for clothes, even if they survive this terrible time when there is nothing to eat and people are dying of hunger? If they manage to stay on the land they will be as poor as subsistence peasants anywhere in the world.

Every telephone conversation with people in Zimbabwe, every visitor from there provides tales as bizarre as anything else out of Africa. The black elite drive around the white farms and say, "I'll have that one." "No, I want that one." Mugabe's wife had herself driven through the countryside, picking among farms like fruit on a stall. She chose a really nice one. A white farmer's wife watched a black woman arrive in her smart car. She was pushed out of the way, while the interloper began measuring for curtains. "Are you going to live here?" inquired the dispossessed wife. "Me? I wouldn't live in this dump," the black woman said scornfully. "I'm going to let it. I've already got three houses in Borrowdale" (the most fashionable suburb in Harare). Around Harare and Bulawayo, during weekends on the farms taken over by blacks, cars arrive and out pile the city dwellers enjoying a rural excursion. They set up a barbecue; music blares across the veld; they sing and dance and eat, spread themselves for the night through the empty house, and depart next morning back to Harare. A farmer from Matabeleland, third generation, whose bore holes supplied water not only to his laborers but to those on nearby farms, now black-owned, saw a car driving up and some drunk black men get out. "We are taking your farm," they said. "I shall take you to court," he said. "But

we are the law now." They had parked the car outside his gate. He asked them to move it. "That's where the cattle come across to the dam," he said. "We know why you want us to move. You don't like to look at black people." "But I look at black people every day from sunup to sundown." They drove off, returned drunk, and took over a wing of his house, where they drank and caroused, day and night. After months the farmer gave up: he had been maintaining the water machinery, but after he tried to show the interlopers how to look after it, and failed, he simply left. "Why are you taking away those ladders?" he was asked. "They are my ladders," he said. "No they aren't. They are our ladders. You are sabotaging us." A farmer, observing how the white farmers around him were being stopped from planting crops by the black mobs, thought he would accept his fate and simply leave. But one of the leaders asked him to plant his crop, tobacco, the chief currency earner. "What's the point, you'll only take it." "No, you plant, you'll be safe." He planted, the crop was a good one, and when it was reaped, baled, and ready, the mob leader told him that now he must get off the farm. "I am taking your farm and your tobacco."

Some white farmers are in Mozambique; they had to begin again without capital, implements, machinery. Skilled and hard-working, they will survive. They are in Zambia, invited by the black government: white farmers in Zambia produce nearly all the food. They are also in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, while the people in Zimbabwe are starving. A month ago the black occupiers of a white farm, a ranch, drove dozens of cattle into a dam and drowned them. Traditionally Africans in Zimbabwe have loved cattle, their "mombies" as they call them. Cattle are currency, riches, links with the past, a promise for the future. It is hard to believe that Africans would harm them. Another story is more hopeful. On a pig farm the animals were dying because they had not been fed and watered since the white farmers were thrown off the land. Drunken blacks had hacked pieces of meat off some of the pigs and left them to die. A white woman vet stood by weeping, forbidden to help the pigs. But then one of the new black settlers, unseen by the others, came to her and said, "We are townspeople, we have these animals now and don't know how to look after them. Please help us." They had taken a couple of the dying pigs and put them in a shed. The white woman went with him and began showing him and his wife how to look after the animals. The latest news is that Mugabe, under a contract with a Chinese company, is importing Chinese farmers to grow food, since the forcibly acquired white farms are not producing. He says this is because there is no farm machinery. Yet all the expelled white farmers had been forced to leave behind their machinery. If lack of machinery is the problem, then why not import some? But is the story true? It has the tone of zany, brutal, hasty improvisation that characterizes news from Mugabe. We can pity the Chinese, who may not be protected against Mugabe's arbitrary cruelties. And what about the poor blacks who will yet again watch their land being taken from them?