

MESSAGES THAT COME 'OUT OF AFRICA'

A READING/VIEWING OF THE AFRICA OF KAREN BLIXEN

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(POST-COLONIAL LITERARY STUDIES)

FOREWORD

Karen Blixen, whose full name was Baronesse Blixen-Finecke and whose pseudonym is Isak Dinesen, was born in Denmark in 1885 and educated at The Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. In 1914 she married her cousin, Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke, and went with him to Africa. There they owned and directed a coffee plantation in Kenya and became big-game hunters. After her divorce in 1921 Karen Blixen continued to operate the plantation for 10 more years until falling coffee prices forced her to return to Denmark. Her years in Kenya are recorded in her non-fiction book "Out of Africa", which she wrote after her return and which was first published in 1937.

PART ONE

'Out of Africa' has been recommended to its potential readers for its attraction as 'an autobiographical account', 'a lyrical study of life in East Africa', 'an authentic...prose pastoral' or as 'an unsentimental portrayal of a way of life that is now gone forever'¹. All of these interpretations of Karen Blixen's book point to a personal but nevertheless objective writing of her Africa and would appear to justify her own modest literary aim that, by relating her experiences 'on the farm, with the country and with some of the inhabitants of the plains and woods, it may have a sort of historical interest' (p.28). Thus the somewhat equivocal title of her book can be read as implying the memories that she is bringing 'out of Africa', excerpts taken out of African life, or possibly even her own ultimate departure—all 'messages' from Africa. A close reading of the text will, however, pose the question: just how objective or authentic are these 'messages'? What impression do we gain of the attitudes and lifestyles prevalent at the time?

The elements involved in writing of one's own experiences are subtle. That Karen Blixen set out to write down her experiences as memoirs, sometimes in a flowing narrative, sometimes in disjointed anecdotes, could point to some kind of adherence to local authenticity, based on her knowledge of that locality, but the fact that she chose to call those memoirs 'Out of Africa', thus broadening the reference point to encompass a whole continent, puts her writing on the scale of a myth: a fanciful representation of a whole set of ideas, generalized out of her inevitably limited experience. Thus, from her account of fugitive, transitory scenes or events in the Ngoma Hills come images that might be interpreted as eternal truths about Africa or at least the Africa of the early twentieth century.

1) Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa*, Penguin Twentieth Century Classics, 1954. Back cover and unknown editor's preface. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Karen Blixen is 'writing' Africa. How would her account be 'read' by her contemporaries in Europe, for whom Africa was still largely unknown and about which many stereotyped images and prejudices existed (and still do today)? What was 'known' about it would have been almost exclusively an 'Orient' represented by Occidentals— 'a European invention, ...a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.'²⁾ Is Karen Blixen's writing from this same mould, given her first-hand experience and claims to objectivity? Karen Blixen is an Orientalist in the sense that she is dealing with Africa, as the non-Occident, 'by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it'³⁾. In her accounts we can discern a person who saw herself as being in authority and as having authority over the 'Orient' but whose power was perhaps only a 'fantasy of omnipotence and control, assuming privileged access to what lies "behind" tautology and stereotype'⁴⁾. To judge the validity of her writings we need to analyze how she 'locates herself vis-à-vis the Orient', her 'ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf'⁵⁾.

To do this, I propose first to look at Karen Blixen's book, to attempt a reading of her Africa, the land and the people, black and white. Then I would like to analyze the way she presents the relationship between the two peoples and deduce how the reader might judge that relationship, bearing in mind the likely difference in perspective, as far as it can be estimated, between the contemporary reader and the modern one. Finally I will consider the film that was based on the book and highlight any significant change of stance.

The initial impact of the book comes from the bold claim of the first sentence: 'I had a farm in Africa' (p.13). This unequivocal statement of possession would make little impression on the reader, were the location of the farm said to be, for example, 'in Lincolnshire', or 'in France'. The fact is that the British reader instantly recognizes that the owner of this farm is one of the race of white 'pioneer' types, with all that this implies, who has laid claim to part of the Empire. Had it been stated that the farm lay in Kenya, this would have been sufficient to produce such recognition, but 'Africa' conjures up unlimited space, an image of exotica, adventure, and challenge. Indeed the first few pages, with their evocative descriptions of the landscape, the flora and fauna, everything making for 'greatness and freedom, and unequalled nobility' (p.13) might fill the early twentieth-century European reader with awe and possibly with envy of the person who owns this farm. The emotive descriptions surpass those of basic portrayal and evoke mythical images. Through the experiences of his white compatriot, the European reader is transported through what was at that time still largely viewed as 'the dark continent', a land of extremes of nature—forest fires, heavy rains, droughts, plagues of locusts, a land too of great expanses of natural beauty, as at Takaunga Creek with its scenery of 'divine, clean, barren marine greatness' (p.295) where the sea 'sang and sighed in the strangest way' (p.296), or as depicted from the masterful viewpoint of the white colonists' aeroplane, swooping

2) Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Press 1978, Introduction p1.

3) *Ibid*, p.3

4) Christopher Prendergast. *Paris and the nineteenth century (Writing the City)*, Blackwell, 1992, p.2.

5) Said, *Op.Cit.* , p.20.

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over the plains round Lake Natron. As the clouds and the storms 'all swing round you in a race and a dance' (p.204), the reader catches the feeling of exhilaration and freedom of space, looking down on the animals, as if he too is being invited to share in an almost primordial experience and 'to feel towards them as God did when he had just created them' (p.204).

There is too the description of the stereotypical colonist game hunters, setting out before dawn in an air 'of such a tangible coldness and freshness that...you are not on earth but in dark deep waters, going ahead along the bottom of the sea' (p.196). The reader can share the excitement of the lion hunts, any bad conscience he might have pacified by the knowledge that these dangerous animals were probably a threat to the local domestic animals and native people. He can share, too, the joy at saving Kamante, the native boy, and Lulu, the fawn, and the regret at having cut down the primary forest. In this way the author appeals to and gains the sympathy and support of her readers. In our minds we set out with her 'while the old constellations of the stars were still out...with the great plains of the Masai reserve...spread at our feet' (p.229) on the 3-month trek to deliver provisions and ammunition, in the style of the explorers and adventurers of the last century.

The indigenous humans who people these great expanses are the 'dark races' who give a 'magnificent enlargement of all my world' (p.25). We read of their colourful presence at Takaunga Creek 'in a loin-cloth and red or blue turbans, like Sinbad the sailor come to life' (p.295), or on the white shores of Lake Natron where they are sensually described as 'naked, tall and narrow, their weapons glinting; dark like peat on the yellow-grey sand', then walking away 'with the wide white burning salt-plain before them' (p.206). This is emotive language, glorifying the images of African peoples who, like the hornbills, have the 'elegance, vigour and vivacity' of the colour black: 'the sweet, noble black of Africa' (p.245). Thus the portrayal of 'Africa' is for the most part a glorified, idealized one, one to appeal to the senses of the reader, and containing elements of the mythical.

Out of Africa: leaving Africa. Denys Finch-Hatton, in dying, became, at least physically, part of Africa forever, as the 'bowstring [of his life] was released on the bridge at Eton...and hit the obelisk in the Ngong Hills' (p.308). The burial scene in the mist has surely more than a touch of Romantic licence, as the 'streak of shining silver' (p.303), reveals the position of Mount Kenya and the mourners realize they have, as if by chance, found the place they were looking for. Nature is personified: 'the hills stood up gravely' (p.304) and again: 'Now Africa received him, and would...make him one with herself(p.305). That a lion and lioness should come to the grave, thus symbolically elevating Denys to the rank of Lord Nelson or higher, can only be read as melodrama. Karen Blixen herself was not destined to die in her beloved Kenya, but left by train, never to return. The final words of the novel, where the outline of the mountain is 'levelled out by the hand of distance' ('hand' suggesting a divine influence) could be expressive of her intuitive knowledge that time, as well as distance, would blur her memories. As she later wrote her 'song of Africa', no doubt enhanced by the years of absence, she can still wonder if she, like Denys, has left some mark on Africa: 'Does Africa know a song of me?' (p.76). So, a reading of Karen Blixen's Africa would register a fair amount of emotional, even sentimental vibrations, the ego of the white protagonists being very evident.

What now of the anthropological interest? The author is at pains to differentiate between

the different 'dark races', and isn't shy of using explicit adjectives to do so. For example, the Indians are 'grasping', the Arabs cold and sensual, the Swahili 'cruel, obscene, thievish, though full of good sense and jests' (p.132). However, most of the pejorative terms are used specifically when Karen Blixen is writing in anger of the exploitation by these 'Native birds of prey' of the Kikuyu, 'a peace-loving shy nation...which, with the ivory, was in great demand on the market' (p.132), so these generalizations need not be read as truisms. The emotional outpouring in defence of the Kikuyus, to which race 'her' natives belonged, may be the expression of a subconscious urge to justify her position as white overlord, not exploiting, but taking care of her workers. The mere fact that she differentiates at all is in itself a sign of awareness of and respect for the various races and overall, she writes without condemnation but with appreciation and considerable affection for the natives and their ways, particularly those of her close acquaintance, such as Farah, Kamante, Esa and Jogona. At times she expresses admiration for the nobility and dignity of the natives, even going as far as to quote poetry :

"Noble found I
ever the Native,
and insipid the Immigrant" (p.28)

She speaks highly of Farah's 3 female relatives, and of what she deduces to be the way women are valued in Somalia, giving her 'the idea of a Millenium when women were to reign supreme in the world' (p.159). Such a deduction offers another interpretation of the author's intentions, for it is possible to read this as a stick poked at Western chauvinism, praise of 'black' values used as shock tactics against European attitudes. There are other lessons to be learned from the native and natural life of Africa, such as the value of being able to harmonize with the world and accept the way it is : lessons learned from watching native peoples hunting, a cock biting the tongue out of a chameleon or a little boy resigned to the loss of a whistle.

In spite of an apparent belief in her ability to give a factual account of the life of the native peoples, she makes a surprising number of stereotypical, non-differentiated statements. These are not necessarily pejorative but must by their nature be prejudicial in that they may, along with credible explanations of such things as the Swahili numerical system, be read as general truths. Examples of such generalized comments are : "All Natives have a strong sense for dramatic effect", (p.36), "All Natives are gamblers (p.248), or less charitably 'have in them a strong strain of malice, a shrill delight in things going wrong' (p.38)—a class of humour rather superciliously analyzed later in the book as perhaps being the result of lack of 'an art and an established church' (p.246). These and the many other all-encompassing comments, together with various unconscious tropes, such as mention of natives' large numbers of children, gaudy and dirty towns, witchcraft and spells, burial methods, etc. and expressed as they are with authority, will tend to be unquestioningly accepted and interpreted by the reader as signs of artlessness and ignorance in the native peoples. This reaction will be reinforced by the many examples of the comparison of Native behaviour and appearance with that of animals, for example, old Kikuyus being like old elephants, young women like giraffes. Although these similes do not generally come across as disrespectful, they do by implication indicate a section of human beings naive and uncivilized enough to be in need of enlightenment or guidance. Added to reports of animosities, rivalries and acts of exploitation between various races, tribes

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and individuals, the average early twentieth century reader would, if only subconsciously, have his beliefs in the benevolent aspects of colonial rule and direction gratified.

We cannot however, gain a fair impression of the world of the natives, because we as readers can rarely hear their words, either as direct or indirect speech. Why is it that there are no dialogues of any substance, no report of the natives' opinions or beliefs?

"It was not easy to get to know the Natives. ...if you frightened them they could withdraw into a world of their own... Until you knew a Native well, it was almost impossible to get a straight answer from him." (p.26).

Even if we accept that these generalizations are true, Karen Blixen claims to have been good friends with the natives, so we can only imagine that she had no wish to report their point of view. This omission allows her to speak always 'in their behalf' and to make decisions in their stead. Her general attitude to 'her' Kikuyu is perhaps reflected in her vision of them as they watch her writing her stories, their heads blending with the colour of the panels, so that 'at night it looked as if they were white robes only, keeping me company' (p.48). Nevertheless her somewhat maternal, charitable approach, together with her insistence on the use of a capital 'N' for 'Natives', can be read not as patronizing, but as benevolent.

As for the white population of colonial Kenya, what reading do we get of their lifestyle and manner? Karen Blixen actually tells us very little, apart from reaffirming what we accept as being the stereotypical leisure activities of the colonial rich: the amateur dramatic society of the quasi-smart set, flower and agricultural shows, books and classical music—things that are taken to be symbols of a civilization brought from the West and imposed on the wild. The author does not apparently recognize any imposition or incongruity here, but rather wishes that her house shall be 'in all humility, in the wilderness a civilized place' (p.224), one which nevertheless is in line with what God would expect of a good and dutiful citizen respecting the pride of others.

The predominant activity, that of going game—hunting, is depicted as being very much part of this civilized lifestyle. Where a modern reader might feel distaste, the early twentieth century reader may well have taken in his stride tales of bringing home 'trophies' such as leopard and cheetah skins for fur coats, and snake and lizard skins for shoes, and of tracking down lions, ostensibly to protect the domestic animals and vulnerable natives, but really in the spirit of the rallying call to the fearless, 'Let us go and risk our lives unnecessarily' (p.200). Such traditional tales of heroism are, though, tempered by the writer's evident pleasure at watching the animals, especially from the small aeroplane, and by her veiled plea that the civilized world not abuse the birds and animals of the wild, as exemplified in the poignant stories of the flamingos and the giraffes. Moreover, how is the reader to interpret the story of the iguana, whose pretty skin faded in colour after he had been shot, if not in the same moral way?

Through the, in fact, relatively few stories of encounters with fellow white men, we gain a picture of somewhat eccentric, free-moving loners, or 'exiles' such as Knudson and Emmanuelson, the 'wayfarers and wanderers of the world' (p.176). Even her atavistic friends, Denys and Berkeley, are scarcely dwelt on. In fact, for much of the book, they are referred to by their full names or surnames, which distances them and arguably elevates their status. Only in death do we truly grasp their value to the white society and in particular, to Karen Blixen.

They are revered as members of a gallant society soon to be lost. We never quite feel their presence except as men who occasionally come to taste again the comforts of the west. Denys is the archetypal white expatriate figure: 'an athlete, a musician, a lover of art, and a fine sportsman' (p.186), a man seen as possessing those 'superior' attributes commonly used as justification for colonial domination.

The reader's judgement of the character of Karen Blixen herself is not a complex one. As the story-teller we see her through her actions and reactions, an educated, intelligent and caring woman, benevolent and brave, but one who accepts almost without question her position as white master of the wild, of the land and its original people. The term she uses of herself, that of 'immigrant', is in itself, however, indication of an awareness that she and her European kin are newcomers, that they have in a way imposed their presence. What, exactly, is the nature of this relationship between the immigrant and indigenous populations, as it is presented to us?

The only example we have to go on is that of Karen Blixen and 'her' Kikuyu. The early descriptions of work on the coffee farm suggest harmony, mutual dependence, respect, affection. It's an image of a common aim: 'we grew coffee on my farm, together' (p.16), of 'eager glowing dark faces', of a factory 'hung in the great African night like a bright jewel' (p.17). The fate of the farm affects them all. It is loosely what Coetzee would term as a feudal-patriarchal model of rural society, an 'idealisation of a past feudal order of reciprocal duties' (as against the future capitalist agricultural order)⁶. The natives are 'her' squatters and yet, from the start, she is aware of an alternative viewpoint: that she can be viewed by them as 'a sort of superior squatter on their estates' (p.18). Whatever the morals of the matter, technically it is she who has claimed this tract of land for cultivation. She takes her responsibilities seriously, caring for the welfare of all. Her maternal attitude towards Kamante, the native boy, is similar to that towards Lulu the fawn, their two names even, coincidentally perhaps, being linked together in the same chapter heading. However, her affectionate use of humour when relating tales of Kamante's cooking prowess and her pleasure at his achievements, in spite of having something of a mother's pride, do also grant him a certain amount of credit. The reader cannot escape the feeling though, that it is only through her that he and all the other Kikuyu exist, through her that they have a 'connection with civilization' (p.43). To be fair, Karen Blixen does appreciate that this is, to some extent, a two-way privilege, which she too enjoys, for the little Kikuyu boys 'form a link between the life of my civilized house and the life of the wild' (p.48), just as 'the free union between my house and the antelope was a rare, honourable thing' (p.73). However, the notion of protection and implied superiority is ever present. The author's self-reference as a 'brazen serpent' arises from her feeling that the native people look to her to take responsibility for everything, including themselves, thus relieving them of the need to make decisions, or think for themselves. Although it would appear that they acquiesce in this situation, needing and welcoming protection and instruction, we might question the value of the resulting undermining of their strength and identity as individuals or as a community. The fact

6) J. M. Coetzee, 'Farm Novel and Plaasroman in South Africa' in *English in Africa*, 13 No. 2, October 1986, pp.1-17.

that she is providing a living, some rudimentary health care, and later basic primary education to her workers would seem, at least to the majority of her contemporary readers, to be tacit justification of her position as mistress of the farm. However, the present reader might interpret this as an 'enslaving kindness', which, by making the natives so dependent on her, removes from them their right to self-determination and the respect born of self-reliance. Karen Blixen's indisputable love for her 'family' can be seen as not containing that level of respect owed to those of equal status, but as the kind bestowed on those needing care. The 'small high-school of White Magic' (p.157), although charitably intended to be to their advantage, thus again seeming to justify the white man as their benefactor, aligns them with the culture of a foreign power, the power whose machines, 'the civilization of man', surround them, whether they want them or not. All in all, we might well echo Forster's scepticism concerning Miss Quested's attitude.

'Her particular brand of opinions, and the suburban Jehovah who sanctified them—by what right did they claim so much importance in the work, and assume the title of civilization?'⁷⁾

Karen Blixen is generally unaware of any discord in the colonial relationship. Although she might humorously describe the bestowing of the inconvenient medals on the Masai chiefs, she doesn't pin-point the incongruity we might see there, but appears to accept the situation as a mark of honour given and received by 'two parties of noble blood' (p.191), reminiscent of Sarah Gertrude-Millin's thoughts on pure blood. Whilst being aware of her superior position, she nevertheless wants to see the natives as having some kind of autonomy.

'But all the time I felt the silent, over-shadowed existence of the Natives running parallel with my own, on a different plane. Echoes went from the one to the other' (p.28).

In spite of her role as protector and benefactor of the Kikuyu, she goes to great pains to disclaim any interdependence. She later maintains that, as with the relationship between man and woman, there is no reliance of black people on white people, any more than there is the other way round, even though all the parties involved may like to think there is.

Although she never actually questions the right of the Europeans to settle in Africa as rulers, the final message we receive is one of a mistress having come to be aware of the rights of the natives to some kind of existence independent of the white man—rights that she tries to uphold and protect. She condemns the law prohibiting ngomas, the missions who infiltrate the native cultures and try to win converts who then look 'like ungenial eunuchs' (p.292) and the authorities who insist on a Western burial for the Kikuyu Chief. Finally she voices to the reader her acceptance that 'not very long ago...the Natives of the country had held their land undisputed' (p.321). Although she accepts the cultural and physical invasion as inevitable, and fails to see the inherent contradiction in her earlier plea to all people to 'love the pride of the conquered nations' (p.224), at least we can credit her with some realisation of the truth of the situation. Her image of the turquoise-coloured bead bracelet which looked so dull on her arm as if 'an injustice had been done to a noble thing' (p.221) is significant.

7) E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* : Penguin Twentieth Century Classics, 1989, p.221

To sum up, the messages that come out of Karen Blixen's Africa are many. Though we learn something of the lifestyles and relationships existing in the particular circumstances of that generalized place and time in history, everything is shown from the colonists' viewpoint and idealized. Karen Blixen, even as a compassionate and benevolent mistress, does not see or want to see, any incongruity or injustice in her own position. In spite of some anthropological and socio—historical details that cannot really be validated, she is writing 'Africa' very subjectively and imbuing it with the mythical elements that Said connects with many Orientalist attitudes. Rather than being an objective 'study' or 'account' of life in Africa, one could more accurately say, as Langbaum does :

'The book operates in the manner of art—that its validity and general significance derive from the personal nature of its vision.'⁸⁾

—ENGLISH DEPARTMENT—

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