

MESSAGES THAT COME "OUT OF AFRICA"

A READING / VIEWING OF THE AFRICA OF KAREN BLIXEN

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The first part of this 2-part essay was concerned with an analysis of Karen Blixen's novel *Out of Africa* and the impressions it makes on the reader. Consideration was given to the authenticity of her account and the question posed as to how objective her reminiscences are. An attempt was made to 'read' her Africa, the land and the people, black and white, and the way she presents the relationship between the two peoples.

PART TWO: A VIEWING

Almost exactly half a century later, a film of the same title¹ was made about this same era, but made with the advantage of hindsight and the knowledge and awareness that distance in time and space can bring. The film does include autobiographical material from other writings by Karen Blixen, but it is of some relevance to discern which stories have been chosen and in what way they have been adapted or interpreted to suit the new medium and the late twentieth-century audience. First let us consider the demands made on the film-maker.

The cinema industry is big business. To make a film like *Out of Africa*, filmed on location and starring two world famous actors such as Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, is an expensive undertaking and to sell well has in some way to 'give the audience what it wants'. Therefore financial considerations might take precedence over moral ones. The film needs to appeal to a very wide, international audience of all social classes and backgrounds, an audience who will, thanks to modern mass media, be, relative to the original book readership, aware of African issues. Most importantly, the audience will know the outcome of the historical situation of the 1930s. Their expectations on entering the movie theatre will also largely be to be visually entertained, rather than to be informed. All these considerations will affect the production of the film. There will inevitably be a change of focus. So, what 'messages' does the film convey to us, in relation to those of the book? How do we view this Africa and does it make a different impression on us from the Africa of the book?

Firstly, if we consider the film as an invocation of Africa, as a representation of the 'other', it can, by its visual nature, go further than the book in this respect. The 'orientalist' passion in, at least, the Western viewer, will be satiated by this evocative vision of another world, set back in time. The visual and aural mediums are used to full potential to create scenes and atmospheres of grandeur and exotica, right from the crimson skies of the initial image, with the vast plain and distant mountains, the sounds of a big game hunt and, swirling through our consciousness, the emotive music, written specially for the film. We travel with the heroine from the cold and wet smallness of Northern Europe, on the steam train, across the sunny expanses of the African bush, to a life so different from the one we know - a life free from pettiness and restriction. We can be the mental traveller that the Karen Blixen of the film claims to be. With her, we can feel the excitement of safaris and lion hunts, literally see the beauty of the landscape, the flora and fauna, culminating in the view from the aeroplane.

1 Film, *Out of Africa*, Universal Pictures, 1985, 155 minutes. Director Sydney Pollack.

Rather than possession, it is a feeling of privileged viewing that the audience has, the small 'a-national' human being in a place unlimited by time and space, and who is able to dominate it only fleetingly. The myth of Africa is still very much present, but, interestingly, the film director saw a necessity for narrowing the location, perhaps to acknowledge the modern audience's political awareness: although Karen Blixen says no less than 5 times 'I had a farm in Africa', sometimes possessively, sometimes nostalgically, the words 'at the foot of the Ngong Hills' are twice added, and the words East Africa 1917 appear on the screen. The producer's intention would appear to be to make the heroine's aim, rather than possession of land, to be a desire for adventure and personal achievement. This is shown in such snippets of dialogue as when she gives her motivation for wanting to go to Africa:

Karen Blixen: "At least we'd have been somewhere"

Braw: "Don't you think you're being too romantic?"

As in the book, the urge to 'make one's mark' and to be immortalized is expressed when the exact words of the written text are reproduced hauntingly, to appear in the final scenes of the film, 'Does Africa know a song of me?'

Romance and romanticism, universally appealing, play a much bigger part in the film. The love story between Karen Blixen and Denys takes on major proportions and, chronologically rearranged and enlarged on, becomes the central theme. The effect of this change of focus is to bring about a cathartic rather than an intellectual response in the viewer. We see the film as a tragic romance with Africa as its backdrop; Africa - landscape, flora, fauna and native peoples.

Like the scenery, the natives too, visually represented, are idealized and made picturesque. They take on a representative rather than a differentiated character. At the beginning of the film Karen Blixen reads from her diary:

'I've written about all the others, not because I love them less, but because they were clearer, easier.' So we know that she saw little difficulty in her relationships with her native workers, an attitude borne out later by our view of her dealings with them on the farm. The image portrayed of them is an over-simplified one: there is little of anthropological or personal interest. Rather, they serve to provide a colourful, exotic background: we see them passing in the streets, affording glimpses of rickshaws, turbans, fezes, bare breasts, bright robes, thus fulfilling the orientalist's dream. At other times, flaming torches in their hands, they are accompanying their new white bosses or timorously greeting them, or again, happily singing on the coffee plantation, apparently mentally as well as physically attuned to the environment, with their harmonious shades of brown that match so well the colours of the earth and the coffee. Their village, too, appears to be in harmony with nature - there is no sign of any of Sarah Gertrude-Millin's physical dirt or moral contagion. All the inhabitants are shown to be pure, loving, loyal and grateful. The only native people who draw our attention are either those who are sentimentalized in the film story, such as Kamante, to whom the audience may respond patronizingly as a 'sweet and naive boy' (who isn't even allowed the abilities he is credited with in the original text), or those who are idealized and mythologized in the 'noble savage' image like Farah or Denys' native servant, or the indomitable Masai. Conversely, the wise chief Kinanjui of the book appears to us as a rather farcical, if lovable, gnome-like creature, a tatty umbrella replacing the red American car of the book and a stiff cape or blanket the blue monkey skin coat. Other natives too have the odd shabby Western garment: to quote Forster 'European costume had lighted like a leprosy'² In short, the overriding impression we gain is of a native

2 Forster, *A Passage to India* : Penguin Twentieth Century Classics, 1989, p.59

population almost devoid of individual identity and virtually divested of self-determining power, but subjected to Western influence. The discerning viewer will have a sceptical or a reactionary attitude to this portrayal.

Against this passive background of scenes and peoples, however, the white colonial population are seen pursuing their traditional occidental activities, be it drinking spirits in the men's club in the hotel (a building dominating the town), wining and dining from china and crystal, taking part in gymkhanas and polo matches, or inevitably out on safari. We see this Western life-style of sport and play symbolically transported by the author from its original setting in Europe and transposed into the African wild. Images such as the champagne picnic in the bush, the rickshaw race and suited musicians wearing turbans are strikingly incongruous and impress on us the imposition of white culture. The focus of the film is much more on the colonial world of the white settlers, as seen juxtaposed with that of the wild. We are not, as in the book, 'seeing' through the eyes of Karen Blixen an 'other' world of anthropological or socio-historic interest, but literally watching her and her fellow white men moving within a society and culture which is familiar to us, but highlighted by its capsulated condition. The more modern issue of feminism versus chauvinism has been emphasized and scenes and conversations added. We feel abhorrence at the attitude of the men in the British Club, who won't even deign to address Karen Blixen directly, but will only do so through an Indian barman as intermediary, or the men who 'go off to be tested for courage' in the war. However, women's rights are more than vindicated by the rather melodramatic sights of Karen Blixen finally being toasted in the very same men's bar and of her riding into the army camp, hair awry, having successfully completed her intrepid trek across the Masai reserve, which had been declared as being 'no place for a white man' (let alone a white woman). 'It was fun', she declares, with true grit. The conversations with Felicity, who so admires Karen Blixen's ability to 'run her own show' and call the tune with men, are also indications of the way the viewer is intended to feel admiration for the assertive woman figure. These additions all reflect the producer's wish to incorporate issues of contemporary interest.

To accommodate the more enlightened film-goer, other dialogues too appear, which are not present in the book. Criticism, or at least scepticism, about the philosophy of the West is often clearly voiced, particularly through the medium of Denys, whether it be directed at the nature of the war as being 'a silly argument between two spoiled countries', the justification for having the natives learn to read, or the morality behind selling lottery tickets to 'win a farm in Africa'. In these conversations issues are spelled out unequivocally for the audience to ponder. Criticism is also strongly implied in the characterisation of the immigrant elite, particularly the women at the New Year's party, as pompous bigots, Forster's 'haughty and venal' English women, who interrupt Auld Lang Syne (which in itself is encouraging bonding with one's own kind) to impose the singing of 'God Save our Gracious King.' To quote Forster again:

'It was the Anthem of Occupation... though they perceived neither Royalty nor Deity, they could perceive something, they were strengthened to resist another day'.³

These sights of the worst of neo-tradition as imported into Africa will not be lost on the late twentieth-century audience: the invocation to the distant European king, who legalizes and sanctifies the presence of these white intruders. We can recognize these 'messages' the film sends us. Finally, though, it is through the moral courage of two women that the Kikuyus' future home is secured. Justice is seen to win through and feminism is victorious. Denys is buried in a high place, dominating the plains, after Karen Blixen has read a stirring poem to the glory of a 'champion being brought home shoulder high' (another film addition). As the final shot shows the lions frequenting his grave, the audience as a whole can gain a sense of completion and the white viewers

3 *Ibid.*, p.47.

feel reassured that white honour has been vindicated.

As for the portrayal of the relationship between settlers and indigenous peoples, it is not unlike that of the book. The farm itself assumes a greater importance though and is represented as a harmonious place where boss and workers are busy together in the glow of the steam engine. This is the work ethos that Coetzee talks of and which alone is seen to justify the ' manifold internal oppressions'.⁴ The natives are shown to be even more innocent and pure, and as not only needing their white ruler, but loving her as she loves them. The prime example of their devotion is the insistent image of Farah changing the flowers in his mistress' room during her absence or him pulling thorns from her flesh. Her rather condescending love for them is indicated by the supply of sweets in her pockets or gifts of cigars to their chief. The image of her in the factory fire scene, crouching, holding a little native boy, is destined to melt the heart of the viewer and encourage feelings of love and charity towards the underprivileged. The Victory Day festivities portray the solidarity of white and black, joined in gratitude for the salvation of the country, against the backdrop of ' codified and promulgated tradition'⁵ in the form of uniforms, fireworks, gun salutes and bands: a celebration of white leadership as much as military victory.

White superiority can be seen as symbolized in the gramophone, which appears more often than in the book. It is a Western superior invention, a tool of leisure brought to Africa, from which Mozart sounds out over farm and countryside, causing fascination but confusion in the simple minds of natives and monkeys alike: a symbol of power and possession, and incongruous. The unspoken justification for this superior position is, as in the book, shown as lying in the mutual love of ' master' and ' servant', in the reliance of the latter on the former and in the fact that the latter is unknowing and, so some extent, unknown, for he never speaks for himself, so must be spoken for. The master can assume knowledge and control; the vast passive wilderness can be expropriated and its inhabitants reined. Further justification is represented by the gifts of medical care and education as in the book, and to these are added that of providing town improvements, exemplified in the sight of street- lighting being installed.

Against this, however, are set those pregnant comments of Denys' which voice the criticisms of a later generation. His critical ' You do like to change things, don't you?', his questioning of the use of the possessive ' my Kikuyu.. my farm', plus his challenge of her presumption that it is her prerogative to educate her workers, all undermine her and the viewers' acceptance of white control. The sight of the pompous women and the added sting of the stranger's comment ' Wogs can't even count their goats' shock and alienate the modern audience. In general, the incongruity of white settlement on African soil is an element not present in Karen Blixen's writing, but one which is visually explicit in the film. Finally, in the heroine's words ' This land was theirs, you see. We took it' and ' The farm never did belong to me', the truth is stated clearly. In addition Karen Blixen's tacit acceptance of Berkeley's Somali mistress, and later, the fact that on her request Farah speaks her first name ' You are Karen, Sabu', as she leaves Kenya for ever, may be optimistically seen as heralding a new time of equality between black and white.

Viewed as a romance which takes place in Africa, the film does not pretend to be an authentic representation of life there. Because the focus is on the white man, unlike the book, the film is not in general making statements about the Orient or authorizing views over it. Although it too contains a strong element of

4 Coetzee. 'Farm Novel and Plaasroman in South Africa' in *English in Africa*, 13 No.2, October 1986, p.10.

5 T. Ranger, Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa, in Hobsbawn, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press 1983.

a glorification of Africa and a fanciful depiction of its indigenous people, it does leave us with a very different impression from that of the book. Set against views of the natives being dependent on or grateful to their white masters are some scenes which are detrimental to the image of white supremacy and question its validity. This stance is more in line with current thinking and takes some account of the course of history.

In conclusion, it could be said that both the reading and the viewing of Karen Blixen's Africa transmit to us, for the most part, romanticized messages and uphold a mythical view of that continent. Although the film goes much further than the book in an attempt to offer, if only as a token gesture, some insight into the less honourable aspects of the colonial situation in Kenya, in general both mediums fall into a category most accurately defined as 'romantic autobiography' whose aim is, to quote Langbaum again, 'to pull the ideal out of the real by calling in as witness not the authority of traditional myths but one's own experience'.⁶

— ENGLISH DEPARTMENT —

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6 Langbaum, *The Gayety of Vision*, Chatto and Windus, 1964, Ch, 4, Autobiography and Myth in the African Memoirs, p.122.