

Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* as a Hybrid of Fiction, Memory, and Autobiography

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Abstract:

Alfred and Emily (2008) presents an interesting puzzle: fiction, memory, and autobiography progress hand in hand to produce a compelling artistic dance. It is more than a conventional book; it is a combination of different elements, a genre-defying work that bridges both worlds, fiction and biography, without borders. Lessing transcends the biography of her parents, Alfred and Emily's stories; she incorporates them into a gripping storyline that cannot be labelled as biography, but is also enriched with anecdotes on family history, war experiences, romance, and even a hint of science fiction.

However, Lessing transforms her own inventions to form an artistic fusion, exploring identity, memory, and morality. Lessing's enrichment is thus a compelling storytelling experience that captivates the reader. It is not just about a solitary perspective that the novel deals with; rather it provides a panoramic outlook that is characterized by diversity as well as interconnection, thus bridging the physical gap between individuals and the universally understood themes. The examination of difference through the principle of hybridity expresses how all differences can be transformed into new knowledge when integrated, creating a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The novel is divided into two parts, each containing separate stories. The first part of the novel reimagines a fictional tale, and lets us know more about their lives, including their parents Alfred and Emily Lessing, who had a better understanding of their early life. Through these docudramatic stories, Lessing explores universal themes like love, family dynamics, and the profound impact of historical events on individuals. It is a captivating journey that allows readers to connect with the human experience.

Keywords: hybrid, fictionalized, family memory, docudrama, autobiography, Alfred and Emily

رواية ألفريد وإميلي لدوريس ليسينغ كهجين من الخيال والذاكرة والسيرة الذاتية

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الملخص:

تعتبر رواية ألفريد وإميلي (٢٠٠٨) لغزاً مثيراً للاهتمام من ناحية أن الخيال والذاكرة والسيرة الذاتية حيث تتقدم جنباً إلى جنب لتنتج رقصة فنية مقنعة. إنها ليست مجرد كتاب، بل هي مزيج من عناصر مختلفة، إبداع هجين قادر على الاعتماد على كلا العالمين، الخيال والسيرة الذاتية، دون حدود. لم تختار ليسينغ مجرد سرد سيرتي لقصص والديها، ألفريد وإميلي بل دمجتها في خط

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مجلة آداب الكوفة - جامعة الكوفة مرخصة بموجب ترخيص المشاع الإبداعي ٤.٠ الدولي.



قصصي مثير للاهتمام لا يمكن تصنيفه كسيرة ذاتية فقط بل كعمل مثير بحكايات عن التاريخ العائلي وتجارب الحرب والرومانسية مع لمحة من الخيال العلمي. وتحول مع ذلك، ليسينغ اختراعاتها الخاصة إلى جهد ذو دمج في و تستكشف من خلاله الهوية والذاكرة والأخلاق. و يخلق هذا الإثراء تجربة سرد مقنعة تأسر القراء. فهي لا تتعامل مع منظور مفرد بل تقدم نظرة بانورامية تتميز بالتنوع والترابط، مما يجسر الفجوة المادية بين الأفراد والموضوعات المفهومة عالمياً. إن دراسة ليسينغ للاختلافات من خلال مبدأ التهجين هو تعبير عن حقيقة أن جميع الاختلافات يمكن تحويلها إلى معرفة جديدة عند دمجها مما يخلق كلاً أكبر من مجموع أجزائه. تنقسم الرواية إلى جزئين منفصلين لكل منهما قصتان منفصلتان. حيث يتميز الجزء الأول بحكاية خيالية ويُعرفنا أكثر على حياتهما بما في ذلك والديهما ألفريد وإميلي ليسينغ الذين كانت لديهما فكرة أفضل عن حياته المبكرة. تستكشف ليسينغ من خلال هذه القصص الوثائقية الدرامية موضوعات عالمية مثل الحب وديناميكيات العائلة والأثر العميق للأحداث التاريخية على الأفراد. إنها رحلة أسرة تسمح للقراء بالتواصل مع التجربة الإنسانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: هجين، متخيل، ذاكرة عائلية، وثائقي درامي، سيرة ذاتية، ألفريد وإميلي

Section One: Introduction

Alfred and Emily (2008) is a unique and personal novel by the British author Doris Lessing, published in 2008. The book is a combination of fiction and non-fiction, exploring the lives of Lessing's parents, Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh, and how their experiences were shaped by World War I (Pulda, 2010, p. 18). The first half of the novel presents a fictional narrative that envisions an alternate reality in which World War I never occurred. In this section, Lessing creates a story of what her parents' lives might have been like had the war not influenced them (Cervants, 2016). Alfred is portrayed as a farmer in England, while Emily pursues her dream of becoming a nurse (Sprague, 2009, p. 150).

The second half of the book is a nonfictional memoir, in which Lessing recounts the actual lives of her parents. She describes how Alfred lost his leg during the war and how Emily worked as a nurse, tending to wounded soldiers (Lessing, 2008). Lessing explores the profound impact of the war on her parents' lives and, consequently, on her own upbringing in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) (Watkins, 2008). Throughout the novel, Lessing explores themes of love, loss, trauma, and the lasting impact of war on individuals and families (Sprague, 2009). She also examines the complexities of her relationship with her parents, particularly her mother, Emily (Pulda, 2010).

Alfred and Emily showcases Lessing's skill in blending fact and fiction, creating a poignant and intimate portrait of her family history (Watkins, 2008). The novel presents a distinctive perspective on the far-reaching

consequences of World War I and its impact on the lives of those who experienced it directly or indirectly (Sprague, 2009).

Section Two

A Hybrid of Fiction, Memory, and Autobiography in *Alfred and Emily*

Theoretical framework provides a foundational background for the analysis of *Alfred and Emily*. Several scholars and philosophers discussed hybridity, memory, and autobiography. In *The Location of Culture* (1994) Homi Bhabha offers a necessary theoretical background to understand *Alfred and Emily*. Bhabha defines hybridity as, “a problematic of colonial representation... that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse” (p. 114). This model demonstrates how Lessing's war narrative hybridity enables oppressed family stories to subvert and reposition hegemonic historical narratives of the Great War and colonial experiences.

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia offers useful understanding regarding the different voices in *Alfred and Emily*. As stated by Bakhtin (1981). “The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (p. 262).” Such theoretical perspective explains how Lessing is weaving in and out of both an autobiographical and a fictional discourse without favoring either one of them.

In Maurice Halbwachs's *The Social Frameworks of Memory* (1992), considered a pioneering theoretical exploration of the topic, Halbwachs insists that memories are only made possible by the social relations and collective representation of a particular community: “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (p. 38). This applies especially to Lessing's construction of her parents' memories within larger historical contexts. Marianne Hirsch's theorization of postmemory in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012) offers a fundamental reference

for approaching Lessing's transmitted trauma. Postmemory refers to "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (p. 5). Pierre Nora's work on *Realms of Memory* (1996), may also provide theoretical support for conceptions of how *Alfred and Emily* functions as a textual site where personal and collective memories conjoin and vie for force.

Finally, Paul John Eakin's work *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999) highlights the collaborative nature of life writing, maintaining that "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation" (p. 43).

Doris Lessing was born to British parents in Persia in 1919. Alfred Tayler, her father, served in World War I. Due to the severity of his injuries, one of his legs was amputated. Later, he married Emily McVeigh, one of the nurses who had cared for him during his hospital stay. In 1925, while on leave, he toured the Empire Exhibition in London and became interested in farming in Southern Rhodesia. In the same year, he impulsively moved to Africa with his wife and two young children, using a government loan to purchase 3,000 acres of land. In 1949, she accompanied her son and the manuscript for her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, to London. The first publisher she approached, Michael Joseph, accepted this manuscript and its release was an instant success. She has remained in England despite much travel since then. She is private about her personal life, and interviews over the years have mostly focused on her professional life. (Whittaker, 1988)

Hybrid fiction is a sort of writing that mixes aspects from two or more distinct genres or styles to create a new and original work. In this genre, authors deliberately combine elements from various genres, such as science fiction, romance, horror, fantasy, and historical fiction, to create a new and often startling narrative. A hybrid fiction, for instance, may combine the world-building and technology of science fiction with the emotional depth and character-driven plot of literary fiction. Instead, it

may combine the action and excitement of a thriller with the supernatural elements of a horror story. Possibilities are limitless, and the resulting works frequently transcend established genre boundaries and provide readers with novel and engaging narrative experiences. (Grassían, 1974)

Alfred and Emily covers the lives of the author's parents, Alfred and Emily McFarlane. The narrative attempts to comprehend their struggles, victories, and life experiences, as well as to update her earliest memories of them. Lessing combines her own memory and imagination to create a new narrative that aims to fill the gaps left by time, reconstruct her parents' past, and ultimately provide a deeper understanding of their lives. "I remember vividly the difficult things, the drunk woman who shared my bedroom, my mother lying forever in bed, I remember better a delight of my childhood that began about the time my mother got out of bed." (Lessing, 2008, p.163) The novel's varied nature prevents it from being categorized as autobiography or biographical fiction alone. For instance, it contains parts of memoir, autobiography, fiction, and even letters. This means that, throughout the work, Lessing alternates between many timelines that combine the past and the present, as well as reality and the imagination. In this way, the novel is a sort of created memory, as Lessing combines genuine and invented memories with her personal narrative to create a new, hybrid version of her family's history, and when Britain was; (Parker, 2008)

Wealthy, was booming, was at a level of prosperity the leader writers and public figures congratulated themselves and everybody on. Britain had not had a war since the Boer War; nor were there wars in Western Europe, which was on a high level of wellbeing. It was enough only to contrast the dreadful situation of the old Austrian Empire and the Turkish Empire, in collapse, to know that keeping out of war was a recipe for prosperity. Various skirmishes in Africa, which could have grown worse, were damped down, because 'Why spoil what we have?' France, Germany, the Low Countries were booming. (Lessing, 2008, p. 83)

This passage describes a time of peace and prosperity in Europe, particularly in Britain, between the end of the Boer War and the beginning of World War I. The author adds that different conflicts in Africa were subdued and contrasts the situation in the crumbling Austrian and Turkish empires with the affluence of Western Europe. The prevailing feeling among public personalities was to congratulate themselves and others on the degree of wealth and to avoid war at all costs, since it was viewed as a means of sustaining this affluence. France, Germany, and the Low Countries were also thriving, demonstrating that this was a moment of economic development and stability for the entire continent. However, the mention of “damped down” potential conflicts in Africa suggests that there may have been underlying tensions and unresolved issues, and the author's warning about the dangers of war suggests that there is a sense of unease or uncertainty lurking beneath the surface of this apparent prosperity. (Barnes, 2017, <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/alfred-and-emily-doris-lessing/>)

Lessing's technique of composing memories is particularly observable. In an attempt to construct a more complete memory of her parents' lives, she has blended and merged real descriptions of occurrences with fictional stories. This fusion of fact and fiction is also reflected in her use of language, particularly her employment of “weird titles” and “odd linkages” that shift between timeframes, highlighting the blurred border between reality and imagination. “Because of the impossibility of making sense of Time in its boundaries. Known boundaries and that is the point.” (Lessing, 2008, p. 159) It is evident throughout *Alfred and Emily* that Lessing is interested in examining her parents' life experiences as well as her own personal narrative, as well as crossing boundaries and genres. Her work is an example of a hybrid book since it combines autobiography, fiction, and memory to depict the experience of reconstructing a family history; (Lara, 2018)

Nothing that she ever told, or was said about her, or one could deduce of her in that amazing girlhood, so busy, so full of

achievement, or of her nursing years, about which we had the best of witnesses, my father himself, or the years in Persia, so enjoyable and so social, nothing, anywhere, in all this matches up with what my mother became. (Lessing, 2008, p.156)

Emily was the determined young woman who defied her father's wishes to become a nurse; the young mother in an unimaginable foreign land; the practical housekeeper who built furniture out of repurposed shipping crates; the reader and storyteller who gave her daughter the priceless gift of an appreciation for literature. Nevertheless, following her breakdown, she was also the neurotic, overwrought lady depicted in *The Children of Violence*, frantic and clinging while her daughter attempted to flee. At the beginning of "Two Lives," Lessing acknowledges the relevance of this characterization;

And dimly she realised one of the great laws of the human soul: that when the emotional soul receives a wounding shock, which does not kill the body, the soul seems to recover as the body recovers. But this is only appearance. It is, really, only the mechanism of reassumed habit. Slowly, slowly the wound to the soul begins to make itself felt, like a bruise which only slowly deepens its terrible ache, till it fills all the psyche. And when we think we have recovered and forgotten, it is then that the terrible after-effects have to be encountered at their worst. (Lawrence, 2001, p. 68)

By utilizing fiction to examine her parents' lives, she is able to picture their experiences in a compassionate and perceptive manner. Including her own recollections and reflections, she can provide a firsthand account of how her parents have inspired her life and writing. *Alfred and Emily* is a potent and moving examination of the complexity of familial connections, memory, and how our experiences form us. By combining autobiography with fiction, Lessing creates a work that is both profoundly intimate and broadly relatable. (Raman, 2021)

Regarding the distinctions between autobiography and literary invention, Lessing stressed on more than one occasion that 'there is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth'. Autobiography, which initially may seem more transparent, poses its own challenges to the truth because, in her judgment, memory is 'a careless and lazy organ, not only a self-flattering one'. She suggested that, even with the best of intentions to tell the story of one's life without embellishment or distortion, 'we make up our pasts.' However, in her own case, she qualified that observation with a countervailing one: '[T]here are moments, incidents, real memory, I do trust. This is partly because I spent a good part of my childhood 'fixing' moments in my mind. . . . Pressure had been put on me to admit that what I knew was true was not so. Why else my preoccupation that went on for years: *this* is the truth, *this* is what happened, hold on to it, don't let them talk you out of it.' (Rubenstein, 2014, p. 2)

Another important aspect of the book is the way in which Lessing grapples with the challenges of writing about her parents. As she mentions, recollection can be faulty, and there are frequently numerous accounts of the same occurrences. "I told her I hated her. Many children do, and no harm comes of it." (Lessing, 2008, p.180) This statement demonstrates the autobiographical dimension of the narrative, offering personal and intimate details about emotions the narrator experienced as a child. She also recognizes the limitations of language and the challenges of expressing the complexity of human experience in words. This self-reflexive approach to writing is a characteristic of Lessing's work, providing *Alfred and Emily* with an additional layer of meaning. Notably, *Alfred and Emily* is not the only work by Lessing that investigates the link between fiction and autobiography. The border between fiction and reality is hazy. This demonstrates Lessing's idea that fiction can be a potent tool for examining the complexities of human

experience, and that autobiography is merely one of many methods to do so. (Pathak, n.d)

Autobiography plays a significant role in the novel, as it is a non-fictional description of Lessing's actual life and her connection with her parents. In the second section, Lessing reflects on her youth, her upbringing in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and how her parents affected her writing. "My first novel, *Martha Quest*, was, I think, the first no-holds-barred account of a mother-and-daughter battle." (Lessing, 2008, p.178) These profoundly introspective personal observations by Lessing provide insights into her own life and career. For instance, she recounts how the grief and loss her parents endured during World War I influenced her view of war and its effects on individuals and societies. She also discusses how her own experiences of discrimination and inequality in Southern Rhodesia influenced her writing. (Lawlor, 2022)

Throughout the book, Lessing also acknowledges the challenges of writing about her own life. She expresses the unspoken truth, "But I never forgave him, never, never," she would insist, eyes flashing, her hands in fists." (p.28) She is not ashamed to tell readers her feelings, "It was entirely their fault My parents, on leave from Persia, were at the Empire Exhibition, and the Southern Rhodesian stall had great mealie cobs, and the invitation: 'Get rich on maize.' Do you mean to say those idiots believed a slogan on a stall at an exhibition?" (p.173). This self-reflexive approach to writing is a characteristic of Lessing's work, providing *Alfred and Emily* with an additional layer of meaning. The novel, in many respects, is a reflection on the nature of autobiography itself. Lessing utilizes her personal experiences and perspectives to illuminate broader themes, including familial bonds, memory, and the creative process. In addition, she acknowledges the limitations of autobiography and the importance of fiction and imagination in exploring the complexities of human experience. (Dance, 2010)

Hybridity is palpable throughout the book, as Lessing merges diverse modes of writing to generate a fertile and nuanced portrayal of her parents' lives and their effect on her own. This approach manifests

structurally through the novel's two-part division. The first part is a fictional narrative of Lessing's parents' lives before they met, and the second provides nonfictional details of their lives and their impact on Lessing. Lessing is able to present her parents' experiences in a way that is both creative and originates in truth by using both fiction and nonfiction. The novel is hybrid in addition to its employment of several narrative voices. "The books, the talk of war, the reminiscences, then, the illnesses, physical and mental. Stronger than all of these, the bush, being in it." (Lessing, 2008, p.172) This reflects the amalgamation of cultural, historical and personal experiences, literary, war and natural milieu that serves as an exposé of the author's cultural hybridity tragically ambivalent and suppressed. Lessing employs a third-person omniscient narrator to define the story of her parents' lives in the first section of the book. She adopts a first-person point of view in the second section of the book to emphasize her own life and association with her parents. Lessing wished to learn about the English, whom her mother so passionately venerated, but she could not identify with them despite her ancestry, and thus remained an outcast who adopted an outcast's standpoint in her views. By employing multiple narrative voices, Lessing is able to create a multifaceted narrative that offers insight into her parents' lives from various angles. (Sizemore, 2016)

The hybridity of *Alfred and Emily* is also evident in its exploration of different themes and ideas. In the book, Lessing addresses complex topics such as war, trauma, memory, familial connections, and the creative process. "In the bookcase made of black-lacquered paraffin boxes, were all of Dickens, Kipling in his limp red-leather covers, all of Walter Scott, Ruskin; and novels popular in 1924..." (Lessing, 2008, p. 179) The mixture of the books and colours is a reflection of the novel's hybrid tendency. Lessing creates a work that is both richly textured and multifaceted by combining several writing styles and investigating a variety of topics. The hybrid nature of *Alfred and Emily* is one of its most distinctive and potent characteristics. Lessing develops an inventive intensely personal work that transcends conventional genre boundaries

by mixing aspects of fiction, memory, and autobiography. The result is a book that delves into the complexities of the human experience and examines how our relationships with others influence our lives. (Kusek, 2016) Kusek further adds;

Alfred and Emily is an extraordinary hybrid, as Gérard Genette would most likely call it. Its first part, entitled 'Alfred and Emily: a novella', preceded by two photographs of Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh (taken separately), comprises three distinctive segments: a fictional story of Lessing's parents followed by their faux obituaries; the 'Explanation', in which the writer provides justification for various diegetic choices she has made when writing about her parents' 'imagined' lives; and, finally, an encyclopaedic entry devoted to describe the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead where Emily McVeagh used to work as a nurse. Reiterating Lessing's observation, one could claim that the section of the novella is disciplined by 'what is possible,' while the remaining parts are organised around the idea of 'what happened'. (Kusek, 1982 , p. 440)

Certainly, *Alfred and Emily* is an imaginary hybrid story and an attempt to write against history, both personal and global. The story begins in 1902 when Mrs. Lane, a mutual friend, introduces Alfred and Emily at a cricket match in the village. The third-person omniscient narrator relates the story in chronological order. Lessing does not alter any of Alfred's or Emily's personality attributes; Alfred is incredibly energetic and likeable, and Emily is the same.

Memory is a central point in Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily*. This book examines the unreliability of memory, the impact of traumatic experiences on memory, and the role of memory in shaping our understanding of the past. In the second section of the book,

On the mine, the children – my brother, me and the Whiteheads – slept in a large hut... Bidy comes into the hut with a candle

and she stands looking about, wondering where to set it down. Beside my bed a little night-table – a paraffin box painted. She sets down the candlestick on this, and the flame of the candle is half an inch from the mosquito net, which would flare up like a lit match, or a firework, if it caught. (Lessing, 2008, p.161)

Lessing reflects on her childhood and her connection with her parents. She acknowledges the challenges of writing about her own life and the limitations of recollection, noting that memories can be unreliable and that there are often multiple interpretations of the same events. She also considers how terrible events might affect our memories, noting that her parents' experiences during World War I had a significant effect on their life and their worldview. (Cervantes, 2016)

I don't think my memory deceives me, but I think there were more colorful people back in Southern Rhodesia because of the space they had to move in. I gather, from reading American literature, that this is the kind of space you have in America in the Midwest and West. (Ingersoll, 1994, p.12)

The narrative gap between author and narrator, as well as between character and reader, vanishes; the character and the reader both realize that this is Doris Lessing's own memory, and there is no irony in her telling of it. Even though it is a third-person narrative, we feel the passion. As the protagonist of an autobiography, she has a distinct identity and personal history. Lessing breaks the narrative voice of memory and description to highlight the topic of justice and the hardships faced by the people on the continent where she was raised. Lessing also explores the role of memory in shaping our understanding of the past, especially war; “that war, the Great War, the war that would end all war, squatted over my childhood. The trenches were as present to me as anything I actually saw around me. Moreover, here I still am, trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free.” (Lessing, 2008 p. 8) She explains that our memories are often shaped by the stories we tell ourselves, which can be both empowering and restrictive. She

also considers how our memories might be influenced by larger cultural narratives, such as the myths of empire and progress that impacted her own upbringing in Southern Rhodesia. (now Zimbabwe). Lessing's exploration of memory in *Alfred and Emily* is nuanced and complex (Sizemore, 2016)

Also this particular form enabled me to say things about time, about memory—which interests me very much; what we choose to remember—about the human personality because a personality is very much what is remembered.... If I had used a conventional style, the old-fashioned novel ... I would not have been able to do this kind of playing with time, memory and the balancing of people. (Lessing, 2008, p.31)

She recognizes the difficulties of writing about the past and the limitations of recollection, yet also the significance of memory in shaping our perspective of ourselves and the world. With her own views and dramatized descriptions of her parents' lives, Lessing crafts a work that provides remarkable insights into the intricacies of memory and its impact on our lives. (Bloom, 2003)

By blending her own story with that of her parents, Doris offers an intimate and personal experience for the reader, providing a greater comprehension of the challenges faced by war-torn families. She can honor them fully and, with a strong, clear voice even if it is fictionalized, develop their identities, convey their inner thoughts, and create connections between their experiences. The key premise of *Alfred and Emily* is that hybridity enables us to see how two seemingly contradictory perspectives can be reconciled. The story follows the lives of two people, Alfred and Emily, and also examines how they interact with one another and how their distinct experiences shape their relationship. This dual perspective enables Lessing to explore how hybridity can be both a source of misery and happiness. (Tiger, 2009).

Conclusion

Alfred and Emily by Doris Lessing is a trans generic work, an ambitious and powerful hybrid of fiction, where no specific genre can be identified. The hybrid style does not provide a thorough analysis of a crucial era in the history of Europe and Britain, but it also creates a distinctive and familiar attitude when highlighting the ordeal of dislocation, sorrow, and family dynamics through Emily and Alfred's eyes. Two causes motivated Lessing to write this novel in a hybrid style. First, *Alfred and Emily* explores problems of displacement and displacement trauma, as her father was wounded in the war and her mother struggled to raise a child by herself. It is a remarkable achievement to combine autobiography, fiction, and historical research to bring characters to life on the page. Second, by creating a book rather than an autobiography, Doris Lessing can give a more comprehensive account of her parents' lives. The story alternates between genuine stories and imaginative reexaminations of occurrences. The lives of Alfred and Emily provide the framework of the text. The factual aspect concentrates on their life prior to World War I and their subsequent separation as a result of the war. By examining the concept of hybridity in her story, Lessing says that embracing difference can bring us closer together and allow us to build something incomparably more intricate and beautiful than the sum of its parts.



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The manuscript includes all the data used in the study

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The author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest that could affect the content of this research

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