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OUT OF AFRICA ROMANINDA BİR KADIN SÖMÜRGECİ: KAREN BLIXEN

KAREN BLIXEN AS THE FEMALE COLONIZER IN *OUT OF AFRICA*

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ÖZ

Karen von Blixen-Finecke (1885-1962) ya da diğer ismi ile Isak Dinesen'in *Out of Africa* (1937) romanı gençliğinde Kenya'da bir kahve çiftliği kurarak sömürgeci bir yerleşmeci olarak geçirdiği hayatının bir belgesidir. Birinci şahıs anlatımıyla yazılan roman, kendisinin Kenya'da çiftlik sahibi olarak kazandığı on yedi yıllık deneyimi, Afrika insanını ve coğrafyasını anlatır. İçeriği ve anlatıcı-başkahramanı *Out of Africa*'yı sırasıyla hem sömürge sonrası hem de otobiyografik analiz için uygun kılsa da, bu çalışma anlatıcı-başkahramanı sömürgecilik sonrası çerçevede bir kadın sömürgeci olarak ele alır. Blixen'in romanı bir anı niteliği taşısa da, egzotik ve romantik bir Afrika görüntüsü sunarken söylemsel sömürgecilikten kaçınamaz. Yerli halka yardım ettiği zamanlarda hissettiği üstünlük duygusunu saklayamaz. Kenya'da işleyen sömürge sisteminden memnun görünmese de, sistemi değiştirmek için harekete geçmez. Bu nedenle, bu makale Karen Blixen'in Kenya'daki varlığını bir sömürgeci olarak kabul ettiğini ve sömürgecilik sürecini doğal bir olgu olarak varsaydığı sonucuna ulaşır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen, sömürgecilik sonrası edebiyatı, sömürgecilik.

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ABSTRACT

Karen von Blixen-Finecke (1885-1962) *aka* Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* (1937) is a document of her life as a colonial settler in Kenya where she establishes a coffee plantation in her prime. The novel, written through first person narration, recounts her seventeen-year-experience in Kenya as a plantation owner in which she describes the African population and landscape at length. Even though its content and its narrator-protagonist respectively render *Out of Africa* suitable for both postcolonial and autobiographical analysis, the present study examines the narrator-protagonist as the female colonizer within postcolonial framework. Much as Blixen's novel is a memoir, she cannot avoid discursive colonization because she presents an exotic and romanticised view of Africa. When she helps the natives, she cannot hide her feeling of superiority. Even though she does not seem content with the colonial system running in Kenya, she does not take action to change the system. Therefore, this paper concludes that Karen Blixen acknowledges her presence in Kenya as a colonizer and regards the colonization process as a natural phenomenon.

Keywords: Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen, postcolonial fiction, colonialism.

Take up the White Man's burden
The savage wars of peace
Fill full the mouth of famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch Sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

When colonialism reaches its peak in the 19th century, Rudyard Kipling in "The White Man's Burden" records the emblematic attitude of the white settlers in the colonized territories. The colonizers reach the land of the *savage* to eradicate famine and sickness, and strive hard to accomplish their goal, but despite their struggle, the natives would ruin their aid due to their *sloth* and *folly*. No matter how the natives would react, Kipling encourages the whites to take up the burden of saving the non-white civilization. True it is that the poem reflects a Eurocentric worldview regarding the stereotypical characterization of the native

population in a postcolonial context, but one should not doubt that it used to convey the sentiments of the Europeans at the time of its publication in 1899. Indeed, the colonizers regarded themselves as altruistic and benevolent individuals who arrived at the native land to improve the living conditions of the natives and to civilize and rehabilitate them while, in truth, they deracinated them from their beliefs, religion, traditions, and ancestors, that is, from their cultural heritage.

In the poem, Kipling seems to refer to imperialism as the white man's responsibility, and it is indeed true that the female colonizer is almost absent both in the history of colonialism and in postcolonial fiction. As Mohanty states,

> historically specific notion of the imperial ruler [is] a white, masculine, self-disciplined protector of women and morals … this was accomplished through the creation of the "English gentleman" as the natural and legitimate rule -a creation based on a belief system that drew on social Darwinism, evolutionary anthropology, chivalry myths, Christianity, medical and "scientific" treatises, and the literary tradition of empire. (2003: 59)

Patriarchy prevalent in the European culture also influences the colonial structure, and accordingly, women as the female colonizer holds the secondary place in the colonial rank, inferior to her husband or her father. Helen Callaway in her 1987 work of the European women in Nigeria reaches a similar conclusion. Basing her argument upon Callaway, Mohanty argues that "white women did not travel to the colonies until much later" (2003: 59) because they were seen as "subordinate and unnecessary appendages" (Callaway qtd. in Mohanty, 2003: 59) not as rulers. Thereby, "the British colonial state established a particular form of rule through the bureaucratization of gender and race specifically in terms of the institution of colonial service" (Mohanty, 2003: 59). If the colonial ruler is thought to belong to male sex and the female colonial ruler is thought to be absent, Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* refutes the claim that the female colonizer does not exist or she merely exists as an appendage to a male colonizer.

Karen von Blixen-Finecke (1885-1962) *aka* Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* (1937) is a record of her life as a colonial settler in Kenya where she establishes a coffee plantation in her prime. The novel, written through first person narration, recounts her seventeen-year-experience in Kenya as a plantation owner in which she describes the African population and landscape at length. Even though its content and its narrator-protagonist respectively render *Out of Africa* suitable for both postcolonial and autobiographical analysis, the present study examines the narrator-protagonist as the female colonizer within postcolonial framework.

Even though Blixen's novel is a memoir, she cannot avoid discursive colonization because she presents an exotic and romanticised view of Africa in which the natives and the colonizers live together peacefully. The memoir supposedly provides a realistic account of

Blixen's relationship with the native inhabitants of her plantation such as Kamante and the members of the Kikuyu and Somali tribes. Blixen seems to contrast with the white settler image who is thought to be abusive, cruel and merciless because she never behaves violently towards the natives and she provides medical care for those in need. Her altruism initially produces the fallacy that she does not adopt the role of the female colonizer. Indeed, it is for this reason that Ngugi wa Thiong'o claims the work to be "one of the most dangerous books ever written about Africa, precisely because this Danish writer was obviously gifted with words and dreams" (1993: 133). He states that "racism in the book is catching, because it is persuasively put forward as love. But it is the love of a man for a horse or for a pet" (1993: 133). Even though Blixen does not physically harm the natives, the language she employs and her mind-set establish her role as a female colonizer. In other words, she does not intentionally abuse her workers but she seems to carry a saint-like responsibility over them realizing the female version of Kipling's the white man's burden.

Blixen's narration cannot avoid mythologizing or romanticising the African landscape. As Gagiano relates, she regards Africa in terms of "vivid glamour … a glamour to which she considers herself naturally attuned and entitled, temporarily sojourning as if in the world's best honeymoon and hideaway, in a love affair with the landscape" (1995: 96). In the introduction to the novel, she recounts the beauty of the African land as follows:

> The geographical position, and the height of the land combined to create a landscape that had not its like in all the world. There was no fat on it and no luxuriance anywhere; it was Africa distilled up through six thousand feet, like the strong and refined essence of a continent. The colours were dry and burnt, like the colours in pottery. The trees had a light delicate foliage, the structure of which was different from that of the trees in Europe. (1992: 2)

Even though she seems to exalt the beauty of Africa and freedom[2] it offers, Blixen cannot help but reflect her Eurocentric worldview on to the passage as she portrays Africa as an "exotic" land. She depicts Africa in relation to Europe, and juxtaposing the two continents immediately establishes the colonial power structure in which Africa as an exotic land represents the Other in relation to Europe. She situates Africa in opposition to Europe because she is of the opinion that Africa cannot exist independent of Europe. That is, Blixen establishes a binary opposition in which Africa is inferior to Europe. It is obvious that she romanticises Kenya as an exotic land and presents a Eurocentric interpretation of her surroundings. She continues to describe the Ngong Hills:

> The views were immensely wide. Everything that you saw made for greatness and freedom, and unequalled nobility. The chief feature of the landscape, and of your

[2] In a lecture, she depicts her African experience and freedom it provides as follows: "Here at long last one was in a position not to give a damn for all conventions, here was a new kind of freedom which until then one had only found in dreams. It was like beginning to swim where one could stretch out in all directions, it was like beginning to fly where one seemed to have left the law of gravity behind. (qtd in Hannah, 1971: 29).

> life in it, was the air. Looking back on a sojourn in the African highlands, you are struck by your feeling of having lived for a time up in the air. The sky was rarely more than pale blue or violet, with a profusion of mighty, weightless, ever-changing clouds towering up and sailing on it, but it has a blue vigour in it, and at a short distance it painted the ranges of hills and the woods a fresh deep blue … Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be. (1992: 2-3)

Blixen associates the vast African land with freedom and she justifies her presence as a colonizer there by making a reference to the fresh air it provides. Ironically enough, while she thinks that it is the geographical landscape which provides her with the liberty she cannot find in the *civilized* Europe, she ignores the fact that her inhabitance as a white settler restricts the freedom of the native inhabitants and indeed marginalises the rightful owners of the African land. Likewise, in another passage, she sympathises with the oxen due to their hard work because "the oxen in Africa have carried the heavy load of the advance of European civilization" (1992: 241) and admits that "all of that we have taken away from the oxen, and in reward we have claimed their existence for ourselves" (1992: 242) but she does not realise / or does not want to confess that she as a colonial settler also has claimed the existence of the native population stealing their land from their rightful owners and forcing them to work on plantations.

On the other hand, Blixen does not omit the social reality of the time, namely the squatter system. Because of the expansion of the British rule in Kenya at the turn of the 20th century, the natives were subject to living in "reserves" which, in return, resulted in housing, sanitation and nutrition problems. To get rid of the poor conditions, the "squatter" system, which enabled the local population to work and dwell in the owners' land, was developed and the squatters, to be able to survive, were forced to work under harsh conditions. She states that "the squatters knew that in order to stay on the land they had got to work for me one hundred and eighty days out of each year, for which they were paid twelve shillings for every thirty days" (1992: 344). In other words, she confirms her position as a colonial ruler and a plantation owner because the squatters, who do not own the land, instead work on it to earn their living in exchange for physical labour in favour of the landlady. Interestingly enough, by employing the word "squatter" she underlines the wrong done to the natives. While she calls them squatters, she names herself the "superior squatter" (1992: 8). Blixen thus not only repeats the stereotypical understanding that the natives are inferior to the colonizers but, more importantly, she also acknowledges that the land does not belong to her but to the natives and that she has *stolen* it from its essential owners.[3] Still, however, she

[3] Indeed, in a newspaper interview she confesses that "Africa is for me always te blacks' own country" (qtd. in Brantly, 2002: 82).

controls the land since the colonial government has given her every right to do so instead of leaving it to those who have been born there.

Likewise, when she mentions the tax system, she solely records the law rather than criticising the system, the government officials imposing taxes on the natives. The government imposes high taxes on the local population which can only be paid in cash; people are not allowed to produce or sell their own products, and such a condition makes them dependent on their landowners. As she relates, "they also knew that they must pay the hut-tax to the Government, of twelve shillings to a hut, a heavy burden on a man, who with very little else in the world would own two or three grass-huts" (1992: 344). Even though Blixen seems to disapprove the system, she does not attempt to solve the problem or to ease the natives' situation by somehow helping them. It suggests that Blixen as a colonial ruler can never truly sympathise with the natives nor can she sincerely struggle for their benefit despite her so-called discontent with the malfunctions in the colonial system.

What is more, although she does not impose physical violence on the workers, several anecdotes she includes in the novel indicate that she regards herself superior to the natives and thus indirectly justify her colonial existence in Kenya. For instance, when she first encounters with Kamante, a Kikuyu boy, she thinks of him as someone "leading a seclusive existence, like a sick animal (1992: 20). Her description gives the impression that she is surprised by such an unfamiliar appearance:

> He was the most pitiful object that you could set eyes on. His head was big and his body terribly small and thin, the elbows and knees stood out like knots on a stick and both his legs were covered with deep running sores from the thigh to the heel. Here on the plain he looked extraordinarily small, so that it struck you as a strange thing that so much suffering could be condensed into a single point. When I stopped and spoke to him, he did not answer, and hardly appeared to see me. In his flat, angular, harassed, and infinitely patient face, the eyes were without glance, dim like the eyes of a dead person. He looked as if he could not have more than a few weeks to live, and you expected to see the vultures, which are never far away from death on the plain, high up in the pale burning air over his head. (1992: 20)

Blixen decides to cure his illness because she pities him. She sends him to the hospital of the Scotch Mission because her "doctoring" (1992: 24) is not enough to cure him. At this point, she is seen as a merciful and nurturing mother who helps a boy in dire need of help. However, when Kamante grows into a powerful but slightly disfigured man and Blixen evaluates her physical complexion, her colonial mind-set comes to the fore:

> He grew up now, but he always made the impression of being a dwarf, or in some way deformed, although you could not put your finger on the precise spot that made him look so. His angular face was rounded with time, he walked and moved easily,

> and I myself did not think him bad-looking, but I may have looked upon him with something of a creator's eyes. (1992: 28)

Blixen considers herself superior to Kamante. She likens herself to God who creates mankind and therefore who must love all of them even despite their unpleasant appearance. In other words, she aligns herself with God thinking that she has saved Kamante from death or has bestowed him a second life. Thus, her initial status as a nurturing mother transforms into a supercilious master. When she praises Kamante's culinary skills, her self-identification as a master becomes apparent: "a civilized dog, that has lived for a long time with people, will place a bone on the floor before you, as a present" (1992: 35). She reasons that Kamante cooks Kikuyu cuisine to show his gratitude for his master resembling him a dog which would be loyal to its owners while, in truth, Kamante has no option but to serve her. The analogy reinforces Blixen's role as a colonial master who rules both the colonized and the animals. Césaire avers that colonization "dehumanizes even the most civilized man … the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man *as an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal" (2002: 41) [emphasis in the original]. Likewise, deliberately likening Kamante to a dog when he is a boy and a grown-up, Blixen unconsciously unveils her status as a colonizer.

A striking episode which reflects colonial violence comes to the fore in the "Kitosch's Story." In an interview with the Danish journalists, Blixen relates that her English publisher wanted to omit the story as it would annoy the white population and would "break down the English prestige" but she insisted on including it in the novel stating that "either that chapter is included or the book will not come out at all" (qtd. in Brantly, 2002: 88-89). The episode is about an African boy who was harshly beaten by his master and chained to a stove afterwards simply because he had ridden the mare instead of leading it. The subsequent medical and legal inquiry established that the boy died not because of the injuries he had but because of his own choice:

> The flogging in itself, they held, was not sufficient to have caused death. An important factor came into the matter, not to be ignored: that was the will to die. On this point, the first doctor stated, he could speak with authority, for he had been in the country twenty-five years, and knew the Native mind. Many medical men could support him that the wish to die, in a Native, had actually caused death. In the present case the matter was particularly clear, for Kitosch had himself said that he wanted to die. The second doctor bore him up in this point of view. It was very likely, the doctor now went on, that if Kitosch had not taken this attitude, he would not have died. (1992: 259)

On the surface, it might create the impression that Blixen includes the episode to show that she does not approve of the violence imposed on the colonized. However, just like she does not criticise the tax system but only records it, Blixen does not seem to feel sorry

for the boy and she recounts the case as objective as a journalist would do. Besides, she is also of the opinion that Kitosch has died not because of severe injuries but "by this strong sense in him of what is right and decorous … with his firm will to die" (1992: 260). Her impartial attitude also catches Ngugi wa Thiong'o's attention. He states that he cannot observe "a single word of condemnation for this practice of colonial justice" (1981: 36) nor "evidence of any discomfiture" (1981: 36) and accuses Blixen for her "literary glorification of the settler culture of murder and torture" (1981: 37). Even if Blixen claims the opposite when she insists on including the episode in her memoir, one cannot help but agree with Thiong'o in that Blixen recounts the case quite restrainedly like a journalist, if not defensively as a colonizer or disapprovingly as a colonized would do.

When Blixen mentions the European modernization, she once more adopts a Eurocentric worldview and contrasts the progress the Europeans have with that of the natives. She states that the natives do not happily adapt to the Western modernization disregarding the fact that it equates with the colonial rule and exploitation the colonizers impose on them:

> The people who expect the Natives to jump joyfully from the stone age to the age of the motor-cars, forget the toil and labour which our own fathers have had, to bring us all through history up to where we are. We can make motor-cars and aeroplanes, and teach the Natives to use them. But the true love of motor-cars cannot be made, in human hearts, in the turn of a hand. It takes centuries to produce it, and it is likely that Socrates, the Crusades, and the French Revolution, have been needed in the making. We of the present day, who love our machines, cannot quite imagine how people in the old days could live without them. (1992: 269)

It is obvious from the passage that Blixen produces a binary opposition between Africa and Europe and she associates the condition of Africa with the Stone Age while she lays claims to Socrates, the Crusades and The French Revolution as realised by the members of her community, namely the white people. That is, she brags about the European cultural heritage while she comments that the Africans cannot understand their level of progression as they are unable to grasp the importance of inventions such as motor cars and airplanes. She further notes that the African people will in the future also be sophisticated enough to understand the Western civilization: "We took these nations over not quite forty years ago; if we compare that moment to the moment of the birth of the Lord, and allow them, to catch up with us… In twenty years they might be ready for the Encyclopaedists, and then they would come, in another ten years, to Kipling. We should let them have dreamers, philosophers and poets out, to prepare the ground for Mr. Ford" (1992: 270-71). Blixen's assertion that the natives would be able to understand Kipling, a spokesperson for justifying the European colonization, reinforces her status as a colonizer in that she not only seems to agree with what Kipling states but she also appears to believe that the Africans are less

intelligent than the Europeans, and therefore it would take time for them *even* to understand what the Europeans have *already* achieved.[4]

In the last chapter of the novel, Blixen records how she sells her plantation and tries to secure the squatters. She seems to sympathize with them adopting the role of an understanding mother but the fact that she comes to terms with the future owner on how to handle the squatter problem suggests that she accepts colonization as a natural incident:

> The fate of my squatters weighed on my mind. As the people who had bought the farm were planning to take up the coffee-trees, and to have the land cut up and sold as building-plots, they had no use for the squatters, and as soon as the deal was through, they had given them all six months' notice to get off the farm. This to the squatters was an unforeseen and bewildering determination, for they had lived in the illusion that the land was theirs. Many of them had been born on the farm, and others had come there as small children with their fathers. (1992: 343-44)

She negotiates with several government officials to provide a land for the squatters so that they can continue their work somewhere else. What requires attention, though, is that Blixen does not acknowledge the fact that the natives are indeed the rightful owners of the farm and it is not an illusion that the land belongs to them because it truly belongs to them. Her comment shows the hypocrisy of colonialism which enables the white settlers to lay claim to a foreign land.

In sum, such as Blixen's novel is a memoir, she cannot avoid discursive colonization because she presents an exotic and romanticised view of Africa; when she helps the natives, she cannot hide her feeling of superiority; and, even though she does not seem content with the colonial system running in Kenya, she does not take action to change the system. Her acknowledgement "it is more than their land that you take away from the people, whose Native land you take. It is their past as well, their roots and their identity" (1992: 345-46) demonstrates that she confirms her status as a female colonizer, her participation in the European colonization, and her awareness of the destructive consequences of colonialism on the colonized culture. It is safe to conclude that, despite her altruism and benevolence for the

[4] It should be noted that, while this paper studies Blixen as a female colonizer, she sometimes adopts an egalitarian worldview and regards the whites and the blacks as indispensable for each other in the novel. For instance, in the chapter entitled "Of the Two Races Together," she likens the relationship between the two races to the one between the two sexes. Just as a woman is as important as a man, she is of the opinion that both the natives and the Europeans have to accept that the other is essentially significant and that it is only through such an understanding and empathy that the two parties can get along well with each other (1992: 243-244). Interestingly enough, the people who personally knew her do not accuse her for being a racist or a hard-hearted colonizer, either. When Tove Hussein in *Africa's Song of Karen Blixen* (1998) interviews the living members of her household, she finds out that Blixen is still remembered and loved after years of her absence in Kenya. The interviewees defended Blixen against racism: Kamante said, "Mrs Karen was not a racist … She had a very kind heart. She did not discriminate against African or Mzungu, child or grownup" (qtd. in Brantly, 2002: 81). Similarly, her Somali servant and friend Farah's brother Abdullahi Ahmed Weid wrote, "The Baroness felt that all were equal and that justice and fairness was everyone's right" (qtd. in Brantly, 2002: 81).

local people at times, Blixen cannot completely relinquish the mind-set and role of a colonizer, she acknowledges her presence in Kenya as a colonizer and she regards the colonization process a natural phenomenon.

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