

# REFLECTIONS OF CULTURAL MEMORY IN THE ISLAND OF DISPUTES: READING DURRELL'S *BITTER LEMONS* OF *CYPRUS*

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**Abstract:** The clean reading of Durrell's Aegean travelogues favors the elaboration of memories of travels, a proper circumstance of getting involved in the cultural milieu of the island of Cyprus. Lawrence Durrell's travel book *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* (1957), which is based on his three-year stay on the island, a sojourn which coincided with the enosis crisis along with value, personal and cultural conflicts shows how representations of cultural and political conflicts are inextricably linked to representation of modern oriental thought. He sees the clashes of tension in living styles of bi-polar society, characters and British politics even though he claims to keep away from British politics. Island's cultural ideology of 'melting pot' has been replaced by bi-culturalism in the recent decades. The novel is an embodiment of cultural identities in cleavages surviving for recognition which also demonstrates a need for the construction of an egalitarian bi-communal society. The novel is told of in various perspectives of ethnicities that are used as tools for cultural integration, preservation of identity and culture

by the images of prominent figures from respective ethnicities. These perspectives formed mainly under Durrell's orientalist viewpoint fill the novel through the cultural memory construed writer's sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality on Oriental perspective emerged. Durrell filters his experiences through cultural memory after the return to England. Thus, in this paper cultural memory as Durrell reflects on a tri-partite basis will be analyzed in terms of conflicts, stereotypes, identity crisis, clashes and hopes for negotiations.

**Keywords:** Cypriots, memories, ethnic conflicts, cultural differences, values, identities

## I. INTRODUCTION

Travel writing is an intensive journey through differences in time. Lawrence Durrell served at various levels in the representatives of foreign countries getting tasked by the British Administration. He has put forth ideas and suggestions in compliance with the British colonial policies. Although he appears

as opposed to the British colonial policies, Durrell has been described as colonial having served for the British foreign officials (Said, 1994: 34).

Kayintu (2011) in his article states;

Orientalism as a practice might have begun early in the history of humanity, but modern orientalism is thought of as beginning after the discovery of East. In Asia and Africa, the European countries sent troops along with commercial agents, officials, and Christian missionaries. The remote continents have become markets for Europe's industrial products and suppliers of its raw materials (698).

Durrell draws a portrait of flirting with imperialist ideology in his novel. According to Edward Said; "Orientalism is defined as a discourse establishing an epistemological and ontological distinction between the East and the West" (1994: 72). The East, on the basis of this distinction, lacks individual, social and cultural features owned by the West. Through a discursive strategy, non-Western policies are pushed back into "primitive" or "backward".

The images of the European white man are dependent on the negative image of the oriental, 'the other'. Encounter with 'the other' has always been one of the principal elements of western literature. Such an encounter has two levels: either the indigenous natives encounter the European culture with its magnificent array of Christianity, hierarchy, or weaponry, or the white European settlers encounter what appears to them as mysterious, dark, and threatening native culture (Said, 1994: 188). The relationship between East, as the other, and West has always held the superior position. The

dichotomy between 'self' and 'other' is differentiated in the context of Orientalism.

The third world people are displayed only in twisted structures and preferences having lost the values of humanity. In *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* (Durrell, 1957), Turkish men are reflected as "cowards" (Durrell, 2000: 244), which is profoundly disrupting the power and authority. In his oriental perception Turks are not only "lazy" (Durrell, 2000: 53) but also "dull-minded and foul-smelling" (Durrell, 2000:48). In a similar fashion, he likens Turks to "reptiles, sharks and dragons" of the oriental regions (Durrell, 2000: 61). He establishes a similarity between "lighting in the sky and the dragons from Anatolia" (Durrell, 2000: 46). In the description of the "imam" preaching in Greek, Durrell likens him to a bird sounding in "hissing" words (Durrell, 2000: 256). When comparing the Turkish policeman to Greek police officers, Turkish policeman is portrayed as "sleepy, seemingly mute, helpless and depressed" (Durrell, 2000: 28), whereas Greek police inspector is very "elegant, gentle speaking in perfect English" (Durrell, 2000: 31). The author does not make any distinction between the Turks of Turkey as laziness and racially-typical features of the Turks, and as an extension of style and racial nature of the typical features of the Ottoman Empire. He adds, "They seem to be consumed in a disease up to soaking" (Durrell, 2000: 33).

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The author quickly realized “the historical key to unlocking the culture of Cyprus as it was before the all-perverting influence of nationalism”, was not that of the Ancient Greeks, or even that of Ottoman Islam, but that of Byzantium (Severis, 2000: 245). There’s a suggestion that the relative peace within which Greek and Turkish inhabitants cohabited belonged to that of a more ancient civilization, with patterns of daily life more compatible with the landscape and the climate. Each colonizing wave had been assimilated to the island, never conquering it beyond the surface. There were of course differences still, national characteristics, described with a delicious style (Durrell, 2000: 17-20).

Durrell’s prose is, very often, brilliant. It is a style that emphasizes character without resorting to stereotype, with both efficiency and visual extravagance. Being also an accomplished poet, he has techniques and literary tools that other writers never know of. Principle amongst them is the depth of his knowledge of plants, animals and geography, and the way in which they provide life to the text. It is precisely the observational power afforded by those textual skills that led Durrell to grasp the forces and movements happening around him: ancient and unique island ecology battered by storms and turbulent currents from elsewhere.

## II. CONFLICT IN THE ISLAND

*Bitter Lemons* is an extraordinary book. As the work of a lyrical travel writer, we first see beauty; and then horror, when the revolt against the British and the clashes between the ethnicities in the island start to grow. As a record of normality slipping uncontrollably into chaos, the failure of politics and administration perceives island’s fate. Sadly it seems that its lesson has been largely ignored by the

politicians who might just have made a difference to terrible developments. One could imagine that an *enosis* (unification with Greece) is now inevitable. Not union with Greece, but rather the union of the whole of Cyprus with the new Europe, the early undercurrent of whose formation was in reality the force that stirred the crisis of 1955.

After the WWII, Britain would grant the Greek-Cypriots *enosis* (Mas, 2003:233). However, it was later found out that “the British administration was delayed in handing the power over to Greece” (Durrell, 2000: 138). During the 1950s, the demand for *enosis* was disseminated in the island. At the beginning of the 1950s, the British government began to counteract *enosis* and instead of promoting communalism. The two-ethnic and religious community was reinforced towards the partition of the island.

Throughout Durrell’s story, a paradoxical attitude amongst the Greek Cypriots is observed: they love and respect their British masters, and at the same time they want them off the island (Mas, 2003: 235). Britain, personified by Byron (who helped to raise a navy to depose the Ottomans), “signifies freedom, national unity, racial integrity, and most of all modernity” (Durrell, 2000: 130). Greek nationalism, craving ‘*enosis*’, was jealous of the British. No longer wanting to be treated as children of the British Empire, Cyprus is ready to stand alone. Colonial masters behaved with the usual incompetence and misunderstanding, imagining the Cypriots to be eternally childish people, perhaps even noble island savages within Durrell’s orientalist perspective. In secret, tensions between Turkey and Greece were being deliberately inflamed (Durrell, 2000: 122). The colonial administration made a basic error. Cyprus was part of a Europe that had changed and

even matured. However, the administration simply could not see that truth. It was no longer an island of farmers, but rather a homeland to a highly mobile international workforce, dispersed across Europe and America.

Eventually, “the vagaries of fortune and the demons of ill luck dragged Cyprus into the stock market of world affairs” (Durrell, 2000: 45), and armed groups emerged demanding an end to British rule and Cyprus’ reunion with Greece. Durrell was not enamored with the Cypriot militants; he felt that they were dragging the island to a “feast of unreason embedded so deeply in the medieval compost of religious hatreds, the villagers floundered in the muddy stream of undifferentiated hate like drowning men” (Durrell, 2000: 147).

The account of his stay on the island ends when he flees the island without saying goodbye to his friends. Approaching the “heavily guarded airport” by taxi in conversation with the driver Durrell is told “Dighenis, though he fights the British, really loves them. However, he will have to go on killing them -- with regret, even with affection” (Durrell, 2000: 271). Thus, in the light of adverse political developments in relation to the *enosis* crisis, Durrell had to terminate his stay on the island. Prolongation of his stay would become hard as Greek nationalists’ surveillance over the British increased its intensity. He reflects on the point of leaving the island:

It was time to leave Cyprus, I knew, for most of the swallows had gone, and the new times with their harsher climates were not ours to endure. My contract still had several months to run, however, and it would be wiser to let it lapse than to hurry away and perhaps give the Greek press grounds for believing that I had resigned on policy grounds, which would have been unfair to my masters

(Durrell, 2000: 228). His own safety on the island would become at stake, as well as Turkish-Cypriots (Durrell, 2000: 213).

Durrell generously handles the description of the atmosphere of clashes with the traditional traits of the island (Durrell, 2000: 104-7). It used to be a place of idleness relaxation in travel books (Durrell, 2000: 106). However, the troubled state of the island is blamed on the *enosis* crisis. Durrell claims that local Cypriot population is aware of all the tension. As an official of the British policies, Durrell became one of the instigators of the clashes, for he was required to work against the optimistic future prospects in the way of establishing *enosis* on the island. Durrell did not hesitate to emphasize that the island inhabitants preferred to be under the British administration and free from the Ottoman heritage (Durrell, 2000: 107). The peaceful and idle atmosphere of the island introduced traditional Cypriots’ hospitality and pleasant orientalist quietness. The aspiration of *enosis* is mentioned many times and in occasions as the most apparent indications of turmoil in the seemingly peaceful decoration of the island and through the villages on the way to Kyrenina (Durrell, 2000: 13).

Durrell himself transforms into a source of clashes by not favouring *enosis* among the Cypriots. As an Englishman and as the head of the Information Service on the island, he was tasked to counteract against Greek-Cypriots towards union with Greece through the magazine ‘*Cyprus Review*’. In this task, he ironically had to cite his support to the Turkish Cypriot community to achieve partition, which was the last option left to the British Administration. As editor of the *Cyprus Review*, Durrell’s mission was to bombard the minds of the Greek-Cypriots in a propagandist plan (Given, 1997: 63). He attacks the

official direction from Athens by the “rhetoric of local demagogues and priests” (Durrell, 2000: 178). For the Athens radio, he says that its wavelengths are “the distant drums and noisy contentions, based in hate, in spite, in smallness” (Durrell, 2000: 145). As an official of the Information Office, Durrell feels obliged to defend the British Governor’s anti-*enosis* position by counterattacking Greek affronts to get freedom from the British.

When Durrell collects the opinions of the lay Cypriots about the political clashes infiltrating into the various stratifications of the community, he learns surprisingly that Greek-Cypriots do not feed ill-feelings against the English. Despite the already existing pro-*enosis* statesmen’s, they spoke out their faith in the United Nations and love for England (Durrell, 2000: 125). Similarly, even the Gymnasium students declare their wish for *enosis* and love for England (Durrell, 2000: 131), which makes a unique combination of love and hate for the English. Durrell comments such policy to the long-lasting political brainwash by EOKA.

Another source of clashes in the island originates from the orientalism, which is utilized by Durrell for dehellenization of life and feeling in Cyprus. The novel is abundant in offering the evidences that label the island with anti-Hellenic characteristics: “Cyprus was more eastern than its landscape would suggest” (Durrell, 2000: 32). He attempts to display the allusions so that Cyprus should appear distant from Greece, it “being so close to the area of Turkey and Levantine countries” (Durrell, 2000: 59).

Durrell finds Cypriots different in temper from the Greeks from Greece: “I made my first acquaintance with the island temperament which is very different from the prevailing extravert disposition of the metropolitan Greek” (Durrell, 2000: 28). He also

agrees that Christian inhabitants of the island were not psychologically Greek, “neither in spirit nor character” (Durrell, 2000: 107). However, in the influence of orientalist perspective, he is not honest towards Greek-Cypriot friends as he does not prevent from taking advantage of their goodwill for his own goods: “I’m afraid I have become quite unscrupulous in my use of this weapon” (Durrell, 2000: 115). That is the result of dominant orientalist influence in literature into which he was grown.

### III. CONCLUSION

Durrell’s conclusions under the influence of orientalism continue when he reveals the conversations with officials on the island. Nicosia is described as “some flyblown Anatolian township” (Durrell, 2000: 155), as it is aimed “Byzantine culture was something more than the sum of the elements it drew from languishing Hellenism and the influences of the Near East” (Durrell, 2000: 123). From these words, it is obvious that ethnic religious divisions of the island are overtly evident, and this is another source of potential clashes in the island. He adds: “... in such a small island everybody is friendly with each other, though very different” (Durrell 68), which is a clear allusion that communities need to be separated from one another under bi-communal administration.

Durrell’s duplicity and ambiguity are apparent when he adapts downgrading attitude towards the Greek-Cypriot when a drunken Greek-Cypriot boasts in a loud voice (Roessel, 1994: 11): “As for the English, I’m not afraid of them – let them put me in irons” (Durrell, 2000: 29). We see that Durrell both criticizes Turks and Cypriots in order to suit his sentiments to his purposes. In an anti-*Enosis* sentiment, he puts it in the mouth of a drunkard

(Roessel, 2000: 237), whereas he reflects the Turks in a humiliating way in comparison with adaptation to civilization.

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