

A written version of MARIE CLAUDE LAULAU's presentation

Parched Earth, a love story by Elieshi Lema

Intro:

What I would like here is to make you feel like reading this novel, *Parched Earth, a Love Story* by **Elieshi Lema**, published in 2001, and also to offer a short presentation of its characters and themes before we share with **Fernand Tiburce Fortuné**, whose translation into French, **Terre aride**, was published in 2016 by **Présence africaine**. The novel has also been translated into Swedish.



Elieshi Lema was born in Tanzania ;a novelist, poet and publisher, she writes both in Swahili and English,(poetry and children's books). This particular novel ,the first one she wrote in English, is extremely modern as regards the vantage point, the approach, the lenses she uses to make the reader see the different aspects of what she calls"love".The subtitle of the novel is" a love story"(maybe rather intertwined stories about what love can be.)

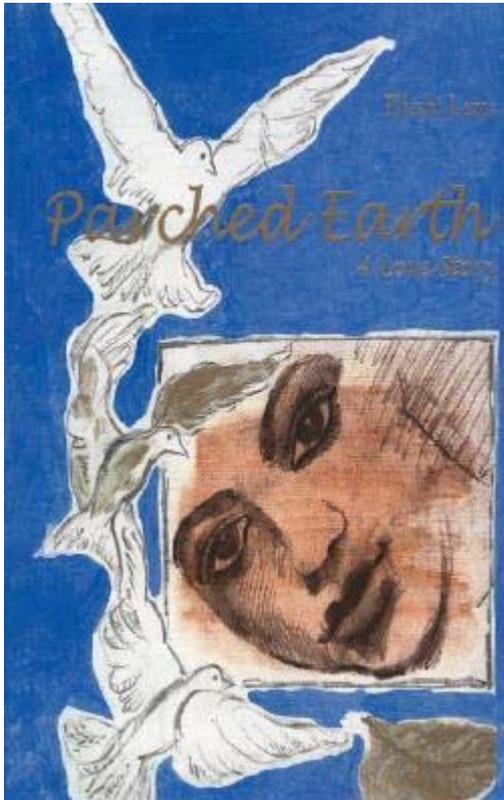


Tanzania is a 55 million inhabitant nation in Eastern Africa. Mount Kilimanjaro is located in Tanzania.

Dar Es Salaam is the country's largest city. Dodoma is the capital. Tanzania covers about 945000 km². Different Swahili languages are spoken (by about 120 ethnic groups), as well as English (by 35% of the population). It gained independence in 1964.



THE NOVEL: Parched Earth, a love story



The Nordic Africa Institute (the novel was translated into French and Swedish) described it in these terms:

“It is the story of a teacher Doreen Seko, and the unfolding of her relationships with three different men. In the course of events the readers get a rich dose of thought-provoking and agonizing reflections on a modern African woman's negotiations of contradicting roles and expectations, and not least on 'masculinity'.

In 2002 the novel received an honorable mention by the prestigious NOMA award committee, who called it "perhaps the first feminist Tanzanian novel in English". “

The narrative:

A First-person narrative. The narrator is mature, middle-aged Doreen, who tells the stories of her past life, thinks back over her life, from childhood to the moment when she starts a relationship with Joseph, the third man in her life. Her voice is at the same time lyrical and matter of fact, informative. Sometimes the novel sounds like an essay, or rather a meditation over the various forms of love and how men and women survive in the deadly social web of Tanzanian society. It is a counterpoint of destinies, each character with their own thirst; their own needs (see title)

The main characters' stories are intertwined in a web. (p 3)

Part 1: **The Struggle with the Daemon** (Chapters 1 to 5): Doreen's childhood and young adulthood memories.

Part 2: **Daemon at the Hearth** (chapters 6 to 13). In chapter 6, Martin and Doreen get married. The magic of love and desire is described, but also the social rituals of marriage and family. Chapters 10 to 13 are central to the novel in so far as the narrator explains her views about tradition and questions it thoroughly.

Part 3: **Ashes and Embers (cendres et braises)** (chapters 14 to 19): chapter 14: when Martin and Doreen's marriage go wrong. Chapter 14 is a thorough and minute description of why and how their marriage withered away (went downhill). Too many social demands and anxieties, but mostly the curse of not having a male child (to be named Freedom) after Milika, their daughter. Doreen gives a rather negative definition of marriage: "Marriage is like walking in the rain, in the cold, wet season, without an umbrella." Later on, she meets Joseph, a retired diplomat, at chapter 17, when she's desperate, parched earth needing rain, looking for a direction. Joseph teaches her how to express what her heart felt, through art. He as desperate for love as she is, and they finally stick together. (Life is about survival)

*After reading chapter 1, we wonder **what "the Daemon" consists in. The answer is given in chapter 2 and throughout the novel. The daemon refers to a person's attendant spirit, namely in Greek and African tradition.***

Greek definition: daemon: a deity, fate, fortune, attendant spirit.

English definition: a person's attendant spirit. This definition is (validated) corroborated in Chapter 2 p 17 when Doreen traces back the awakening of this spirit in her mind. "it was a quiet presence that seemed to threaten my sanity and sense of peace", difficult to master and curb, both a driving force and a kind of melancholy she keeps fighting against. (p 17/18). This daemon is only allowed inside. It is not social, but private. There's a play between light and dark. **The daemon is the heart, not the mind.** (p36)

The characters:

Doreen comes from a single-parent, poor, rural family. She has an elder brother named Godbless, and two other siblings. She becomes a primary school teacher. Chapter 1 p6 "I did not come to this job by choice" p 8: "I did not have a dream». Page 8: her dreams as a girl, as compared to her brother's, are seen by her as non-existent. So she borrows her brother's dream of upward social mobility. As a child, she's voiceless ("mute" p 8) However, she questions things when she grows up.

Her first trauma comes with learning from another girl from the village that her family is seen as poor; Doreen describes it as the loss of her childhood innocence, and hard contact with the outside world. Chapter 1 page 14: "the long ago bitterness stayed with me like a stain on white cloth"

Doreen's teaching career: as regards her motivation, she's eager and enthusiastic at first then after ten years, she's "still doing the same things, with a little less drive, a little less passion». She's a no-

nonsense, strict teacher. However, she believes in excellence and creates a club, trying to enhance her colleagues' creativity. It's a challenge.

After refusing to get married to **Zima**, a colleague, she marries Martin, an accountant; they live in Dar Es Salaam. She becomes a mother; Her relationship with daughter Milika is antagonistic at first, then they become closer when Doreen overcomes her own frustrations.

Martin wants a boy child. This becomes a problem and he has another relationship. Finally, after her marriage has failed, she meets **Joseph**, a retired ambassador and a painter.

"good-hearted Zima" (p 21) is also the discipline master at the school. He is supposed to be a rational, logical choice as a life partner for Doreen. But Doreen refuses to marry him. He belongs to tradition, to the traditional view of education, he believes in beating the students.

Martin is Doreen's lover then husband. He comes from the town and has urban ways but rural roots. Later in life, he more or less abandons her for another woman.

Joseph, Doreen's last partner or love interest (sentimental choice), appears in chapter 17; a 55-year old retired diplomat, he is the only one interested in "parched earth and its quest for rain", and in women's predicament, as well as his own. He has been abandoned by his wife.. Doreen sees him as "kind and knowledgeable", and "he doesn't believe in division of work based on sex". He's also an artist. He used to be very ambitious and successful. His wife, Justine, left him for another man and he can't get over it. She left him and his money, accepting only a painting entitled *Parched Earth Needing Water*.

The other women:

Great Aunt Mai, "long adapted to living in the social web" (page 5), is a "shrewd but very loving woman" (page 6), she has a down to earth, hands-on approach to life, but also a questioning and active one. (page 6). She's married to Simbo; they have no children. She's the one who took in Doreen's mother when the latter got pregnant and was thrown out of the home by her parents. She is aware of the value of education for women (page 6: "This job of yours is the real husband, hold on to it like life" is her piece of advice to Doreen when the young woman becomes a teacher. She's the one who answers Godbless and Doreen's questions and meets their emotional needs. She's a foster mother, the one who knows how to progress through the social web of strict, deadly rules.

Doreen's mother, Foibe Seko, is described as a "social orphan" by Aunt Mai. Young (15?) and innocent of the things of love, she was thrown out of her parents' home for having an affair with a married man, Sebastian) ten years her elder. She's his first true love, they have a son, Godbless, then a daughter, Doreen. She is the head of a single-parent family. She has four children «by men who didn't marry her". She's a rebel.

Her moods: She's mostly sad and burdened, she's angry at men and people in general. She prefers cows. She's strict and, even though not insensitive, she doesn't allow herself or her kids any show of emotion; chapter 2 "stop crying or I'll thrash you" "Go wash (the bleeding knee) with salt water». Her predicament and social isolation originate from social rebellion, from standing up for her right to love

the man she had chosen for herself. Later in life, Doreen describes her «elegance “ and “command». Doreen feels deeply connected to her.

P 121: Foibe Seko forges her own world and creates her own line, her own dynasty, her own “cluster”. She’s the one who starts it, then her son must do without a father (he abandoned his son) and a grandfather, who “chased (his) mother away like a mangy dog”

The name Seko meaning “laughter”, the mother makes this statement: “my children will find laughter in my house” meaning she is the heart of the cluster.

Doreen’s brother, who answers the (ironical?) name of Godbless even though he is a socially frustrated man (page 6). Lack of education is the reason of his frustrations and has curtailed his ambitions (page 7: he wanted to be a minister; he had dreams but couldn’t get the right marks at school). He’s also deeply frustrated not to have a father or a father image to rely on, to “belong in the order of things «He has dreams, about his own future and what he could do for his mother”. As a boy and man, he has a voice, contrary to his sister. Godbless is in fact, cursed, even though he “came into the world carried on the head». Doreen and Godbless are re a glitch in the carefully woven web of Tanzanian village society, and a threat to the children born in wedlock. They aren’t the norm.

Doreen and Godbless’s father, Sebastian: he is defined by his absence. He is badly needed by his son Godbless. The question is asked, several times, both by Doreen and Godbless: “where is my father?” We learn, in chapter 11, that Godbless’s father was deemed as morally corrupt by his elders, as he fell in love with Foibe Seko when he was married; he was **a prisoner** to his village traditions. Even though he loves Foibe Seko, he is unable to find a way out of their situation.

The young ones, although they are but minor characters, embody the future: Milika and Joseph’s daughter both stand up effortlessly for their own rights, they’re entitled and have no qualms. They both have their own voices. They’re articulate. As for Joseph’s son, he understands his mother’s situation.

Therefore we come to the different themes in this novel:

Themes:

- *The main theme is **love**, “the variegated etchings of the face of love..”. (=with various streaks of colour); relationships.*

Doreen’s love for Martin is “a daemon without a form” (p43) she ‘d like to run away from, at first, and marry sensible, reasonable Zima. **passage pp43-44**

love and sex are intertwined, one can’t go without the other, and vitality of mind and body springs from it. see chapter 7 (the weeks after the wedding)

Love is magic and a window to the soul: between Sebastian and Foibe (p 108: it becomes a trap)/between Martin and Doreen (p 69: bold description of love-making)

Love is a dangerous illusion: p 46: “ Perhaps...why is love such a threat?”

- **Describing through intertwined stories the strife of love versus social pressure and conformity**, the strife of the daemon (the heart) vs the deadly social web...this is the main reason why this novel was written.

First, Foibe Seko's story of passion, innocence and rebellion against the rules when confronted with social norm. **Later on**, Foibe "fights life with life". She has another child, Doreen, with the same man, then two sons with other men.

MARRIAGE: Doreen and Martin fall totally, deeply in love with each other, they become lovers, get married and have a daughter. These are happy and playful times. However, social conformity sneaks in in the shape of Martin's sister, who teaches them how to behave like man and wife. Things change altogether when gender conformity spoils it all: Martin wants a male child and they never manage to have this child. Therefore their relationship goes downhill (withers); he starts another relationship with a younger woman (*exactly like his father, who wanted more sons*) and Doreen becomes obese and is on the verge of suicide.

Finally, there's this chance encounter with Joseph, a retired ambassador and an artist, who has been abandoned by his wife. Thanks to all the suffering he went through because of his relationship with his wife and son, he understands the women's predicament and we also witness man's predicament in that case, as we had witnessed Zima's helplessness when he realized that Doreen loved another man.

- **Male entitlement** in Tanzanian society. Tanzanian society, patriarchal society as a deadly web. (Joseph is the character who uses and explains the word "patriarchal")

Each element is conditioned for a role, in a conservative society (p 5, aunt Mai says: "that's how things are"). Doreen declares "I did not then (i.e. when I was a kid) know about a system that deprived some people for the benefit of others." (namely, that deprived women and girls for the benefit of boys and men)

Hierarchy rules men and women's relations: see chapter 1, pages 7, 8 and 9. Authority and vision are supposed to be Godbless's attributes, contrary to his sister. When his dreams are swamped into poverty, vision and hope turn into bitterness. Men are entitled. However, there's a feminine element inside them:

Disappointed Zima is twice described as a woman (p43, 44). His feminine side and "fragility" is displayed. However, he insults Doreen, in a typically male fashion, when she dares tell him she doesn't love him. He seeks to punish her for hurting his pride. (p 45) p 92: Martin, when very much in love with Doreen, harbours a "softness" that makes him "a great lover but not man enough".

- **Being a woman in that kind of society // Tradition and modernity**

In that **patriarchal society**, hard work is expected from girls and women (chapter 1, pages 1 and 9). Doreen says: «Hard work was a lesson I internalized just by watching my mother». Girls are supposed to care for people and animals. **P 12: "the woman's role of nurturing.** "Women nurture the

earth like they do children and husbands". Women bear children and become "fat, as required by custom" (p 14) **p72: Woman "cooks herself into the husband's heart"** (nurturing is a way to obtain and secure love)

As opposed to this, Martin and Doreen's courting and wedding day and "honeymoon" are antisocial. They surprise or shock their friends and family and even lookers-on. However, they come back to normal thanks to the outside world (page 72: "until his sister came and worked hard to make Martin a good husband and me a good wife": they go from the state of nature to that of culture, literally, and then they're back to normal, **Doreen "grazed into (her) place in the kitchen while the man of the house was run from the home to bars" (p72)** She's lost her own identity. She has "cooked herself into (her) husband's heart" and they call her Mama Patrick.

Women are not expected to bring change and have a vision. Chapter 1 page 10, Doreen says: «I was already conditioned by the reality of my childhood, and unlike him (Godbless), did not look for alternative realities that I could recreate and make mine». **When they do, they do it unseen, like clever Aunt Mai:** page 6: "(she)" would then undermine, in her subtle way, that law which made things that way». Aunt Mai has a role to play when she welcomes Doreen's mother, when the girl, unmarried and pregnant with her first child, is chased away from her parents' house by her father. "tradition allowed it». Aunt Mai is also the character who suggests the "hidden" way to have a male child (maybe this is what Doreen will attempt with the help of Joseph? The end of the novel is open)

In fact, girls are caught in a trap concerning sex, their mothers do not tell them, then they're considered guilty: «crime and punishment" (p94). They're scorned by their own families then by the whole Tanzanian society. Older Doreen **questions this tradition**, wondering how society can "**gang up against its own kind**" (p 101).

Society is compared to a web. **It is a hindrance to the truth of the heart** (p 72, chapter 7). Woman's life is lived **behind a mask**. (p 157: a masquerade"). Therefore the question of women's **identity** is asked (laid) p 157 "what does this masquerade turn a girl and woman into?). **The web is lethal (p 158)**

- **Also education and career**, keys to climbing the social ladder. see Godbless, Doreen and Joseph

The tone: This novel may be described as feminist, especially focused on patriarchal Tanzanian society, **but with a universal scope**. Disturbing, **thought-provoking questions are asked:**

Ex: p153: Is it wrong for a man to marry a woman because she is kind, patient and understanding while he harbors desire and love for another? **And the other way round:** p 181: Well...look at others?"

Town vs rural people: rural people are "locked into strict ways of life" (p 15). This goes so far as actually forbidding the girl who gets married from coming back to her parent's home "even in the event of death" (chapter 13, page 134). Therefore the narrator **openly suggests redefining the concept of Home.** (p 135)

A very modern and contemporary, description of the human approach of reality as we see it (page 5: "yes, I think children live now.....only the very naïve ..; living it fully").A postmodern theme.

STYLE:

There are harsh, passionate words that elicit the narrator's anger but also poetry: P57?p58, p .26 The power of words and stories is pervasive. In chapter 12, the narrator says" I am amazed at how our story lines join, all the time, my mother's and mine,Godbless and Martin's."

CONCLUSION:

Her novel has been described as feminist, especially in the context of her own country and the patriarchal society Doreen belongs to. However, it could be said that more than "a westernized version of a feminist novel", it is a hands-on, practical description and analysis of women and men's predicament , caught as they are in the deadly web of a locked traditional society,but also a lyrical and deeply poetic text.(voir passages en italique)

We find some common themes and even expressions or imagery with our own context in Guadeloupe.However, the ideas in this novel struck me as universal.