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## The Alexandria Quartet: An Interface between Life and Art

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There are many critics who feel that *The Alexandria Quartet* is a very impressive but in some ways flawed and imperfect, extraordinarily vivid but too rich and gaudy. What is finally the critical assessment of Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*?

The year 2012 marked the centenary of the birth of novelist and poet Lawrence Durrell, one of the leading writers of the post-war years. His most famous work *The Alexandria Quartet*, a series of four novels produced between 1957 and 1960 was greatly influenced by the Mediterranean places and cultures that he experienced. Durrell's views on the primacy of place in human experience were focused on his beloved city Alexandria. He experimented with various modern fictional techniques and could convincingly depict a city which was in fact alien to his culture. He could successfully use the theme of the city which has become increasingly popular in Western literature during the past two centuries. He has been able to display how environment and sociological setting has become a moving force in the modern novel and not just a backdrop of conventional setting.

Durrell is also unique for 'a style that contradicted predominant aesthetic tastes yet was popular and celebrated!' He integrated his writing with different aspects of reality and his search for truth in life which is permeated with illusions. The pattern of his novel is complex and as Durrell himself has made it clear in his Author's note in *The Alexandria Quartet*, that it is deliberate.

Lawrence Durrell had also experienced the effects of war and the dissatisfaction and illusion of human relations and had finally come to the conclusion that the only saving grace in life is literature, art and artistic creativity. Life which is experienced through social relations is a most frustrating experience. Man can only achieve satisfaction by withdrawing himself into seclusion and solitude from where as an artist he can derive a proper perspective of life and so develop his creative instincts.

Lawrence Durrell was first and foremost an artist and his main intention in his novel *The Alexandria Quartet* was to depict the artist's view of life and reality and his final curative value. In the *Quartet* there is an optimistic vision of art as a mode of transcendence. Durrell made use of the scientific data like Einstein's concept of space-time as he renounced intellect and reason as misleading and affirmed his faith in intuition, instincts and emotion. The final lesson brought out by the narrator of the novel *The Alexandria Quartet* is the "emotional education" of an artist, the kindness and tenderness that rises above life and transcends all barriers. Lawrence Durrell's primary contribution to twentieth century writing is his most challenging and sublime masterpiece *The Alexandria Quartet*. It is the 'summum bonum' of all Durrell's literary, aesthetic and philosophical theories in life.

“Guardian Books Podcast: *Lawrence Durrell at 100*” features presenter Claire Armistead in conversation with travel writer, Jan Morris who was specially commissioned for Durrell 2012: The Lawrence Durrell Centenary. Speaking about her encounters with Lawrence Durrell- in life and on page Morris says:

This is what I think Lawrence Durrell does so brilliantly in these books. It is the intangible, indefinable spell of a particular city, on the cusp between Europe and Asia and Africa- and on the cusp between a historical past and a very remarkable present- that makes the city- unique among cities. It was one of a kind. And *The Alexandria Quartet* is one of a kind.”

Morris also goes on to add:

At the basic level, I think that it has lasted very well, and it will always be read, I feel sure [...] The work itself is really such a great idea, and is executed, really, with such remarkable technical skill and imagination, that I feel sure that people will still be reading them one hundred years from now.

Morris, in her closing her remarks makes it clear that the tetralogy has secured a permanent place within world literature.

Durrell’s novels highlight the sharp difference between Eastern and Western thought and man’s approach to understanding life by giving us a glimpse of a relationship between the Eastern world and the Western world. This relationship is presented throughout the four novels of *The Alexandria Quartet- Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive and Clea* both elegiacally and ironically. By doing this, Durrell’s creative intention is to show man’s place in the universe. In order to achieve this, he first exposes the rationalism of the Western man shrouded in a materialistic philosophy and then turns to the mysticism of the East to regain the lost spirituality.

Alexandria, the city in the *Quartet* is an embodiment of ideas from the East and West which have been shaping the events of the narrator, Darley’s life who represents an artist in making. Reality is not a visualized reality but one which is experienced by Darley. In the second novel, *Balthazar* the city which is symbolical of reality becomes something like a masked ball, but the masks are nothing less than our own numerous false faces we project onto the faces of all men and women around us. Alexandria fills Darley with a sense of introspection and obsession with this single idea- to know everything of this mysterious, enigmatic city.

The Israeli novelist and critic Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff, appreciated Durrell’s *Quartet* as a ‘touchstone work for exiled writers’:

\_\_\_\_\_with its”five races, five languages, a dozen creeds: five fleets turning through their greasy reflections behind the harbor bar” best conveys the polyglot dynamism of Egypt’s lost past, thus serving as a helpful reminder of the region’s rich tradition of “Levantinism”.

Durrell has elevated the historical and fictitious city of Alexandria into a kind of microcosm. Durrell has so uniquely portrayed the presence of the city that it haunts almost every page of the novel, interacting with the protagonists and providing a real 'sense of place.' The main motive in the novel is the realization of the truth of life and existence through the various experiences and dimensions of love. Therefore, the progression of the story is in the dimension of truth.

Durrell makes frequent allusions to "heraldic universe" by which he seems to mean a total and immediate non-analytic apprehension of the world. The heraldic universe thus resembles a visionary state which can be attained only sporadically. The Heraldic Universe mirrors Durrell's own inner turmoil. It has been assumed by critics that *The Alexandria Quartet* is somehow related to the four stage ascent to the heraldic universe and establishes its close affinity with the concept of Plotinus, the greatest of Alexandrian philosophers. Durrell to a certain extent seems to make use of the Plotinian ideas in the novel.

According to Plotinus, the knowledge of the self is a spiritual pinnacle that one can attain. One can rise to a higher level of illumination and achieve a knowledge of the self through sensation, imagination and reason the three lower faculties and the last exhibits the higher faculty of the mind namely artistic creativity or the knowledge of the self, the knowledge of God. The first three parts of *The Alexandria Quartet* represent three lower faculties and the last part, *Clea* exhibits the higher faculty of the mind namely artistic creativity. The whole work shows Darley's ascent to the higher faculty that is- knowledge of the self. It is to these heights that the artists Clea and Darley attain by the end of the last book, *Clea*.

A literary work must capture at least something of the quality of an ultimate reality. Durrell believed profoundly in the artist and his capability of presenting his own special vision of reality. Durrell offers a new means of approaching "reality"- a composite of appearances enlightened by imagination resolving the conflict between appearance and reality. Art utilizes reason and intuition to achieve an analogue of truth. Durrell's theme follows this pattern – from characters of contradictory traits to illusion, to reality and ultimately to truth.

Music Composer, Lisa Bielawa reflecting on how Durrell's writing helped to shape her ambitious "site- specific musical work," writes:

I was reading Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* while composing *Chance Encounter*, and I was celebrating...Durrell helped me realise that I was writing a set of love songs to the city where I had spent my entire adult life, the city that shaped my ideals concerning the interface between music and people. Musical experiences that heighten a sense of place can actually breakthrough to that region of perception that transcends individual identity. Durrell encouraged me to look around me and see where I am, and write exactly from there.

Darley, the narrator can return to the city, Alexandria only when he is stripped off his ego defenses and rationalized justifications. Only then, does it signify that he is coming to terms with life. The second part of the novel, *Balthazar* is centrally located with the search for valid identity. The undiscovered self lies somewhere beyond the

compost of secret pleasures and treacheries which  
are an inseparable part of every human relation. (Balthazar: 223)

Thus in the third novel of the *Quartet*, *Mountolive*, Durrell attempts to portray a truth about life and human relationships. The protagonist of this novel, Mountolive learns much about external from his experiences in public and personal life which is contrasted with private passivity, but he also realizes that mere facts are less significant and less accurate than felt reality. Thus reality and truth are presented on personal levels, in a particular environment within a definite time frame. The fictional reality in this novel is based on an actual reality in the life of the author, Durrell. Thus, we see that towards the end of this novel there is still a question of about the nature of truth, which can be answered by a further self- analysis of various experiences and encounters in life.

*Clea*, the last novel in the tetralogy gives the answer that there can be no death for the artist but there is life after death – a resurrection. The whole process of life is  
there is only oneself facing forever the problem of one's  
self- discovery! (Clea: 99)

Thus, the novel is a symbol of Darley's "return from the dead with a vanity chastened by experience."

This novel can be viewed as a book of wounds; damaging but in a way life-giving wounds which strive through all the false faces and which can be healed only by the tenderness of human affection. In *Clea*, some at least of the wounded are not only cured but actually transformed-given a new and fuller life. It is through these wounds that we arrive at the artist's healing vision. For Lawrence Durrell writing was a process of reflection and meditation and a means of personal and social widening of knowledge and consciousness. He attempts through art to rework reality-a reality that seems to be fixed and fully comprehended, to find patterns of significance and meaning. In his novel, time and again, Durrell emphasizes about the role of the artist in life. According to him the object of one's life is ultimately to become greater in his own spirit than in his art.

In an interview with Mitchell and Andrews for Paris Review, Durrell spoke on Art:

The theme of art is the theme of life itself. This artificial distinction between artists and human beings is precisely what we are all suffering from. An artist is only someone unrolling and digging out and excavating the areas normally accessible to normal people everywhere and exhibiting them as a sort of scarecrow to show people what can be done with themselves.

In Darley's life art has been a purifying factor and without any doubt his endurance becomes a real teacher. The novel reads like a further refining of memory through which the artist –writer achieves another phase of self-realization through the observations and interpretations of Balthazar who is the most philosophical and most benevolent of the men in the *Alexandria*

*Quartet*. This realization assists man to ascend and elevate himself from the mundane existence in space.

Rachel Foss, lead Curator for Modern Literary Manuscripts at the British Library, releasing the audio CD- *The Spoken Word: Lawrence Durrell* for Durrell 2012: Lawrence Durrell Centenary writes:

We are delighted to be able to bring to a wider audience these rare recordings. They highlight the inter-relationship between Lawrence Durrell's interests in art, philosophy and science and between genre and form, which make him so complex, fascinating and original a writer. The British Library's new Spoken Word CD is one of many ways in which Durrell's legacy will be explored in 2012, his centenary year.

Lawrence Durrell seems to examine the complexity of human behavior without pronouncing any verdicts. Artists are born to explore the inward riches of solitary life on behalf of society. The growth of the narrator, Darley in the novel, and Clea as artists and lovers is seen in the final volume of the *Quartet*, who completely identify in each as inseparable entities. Thus Darley and Clea symbolize the relationship between art and life which has been manifested clearly by the novelist, Durrell towards the end of the novel.

Thus Darley transcends the norm and finds fulfillment through art. It shows the maturation of the individual into a human being in life and his final growth into an artist. Darley's last and deepest intimacy is with Clea which is quite different from his other intimacies. They could remain apart and come together again spontaneously. According to him the biblical words, "helpmeet" means much greater than "lover" and "lovingkindness" describes the real love and concern for others which rise above life and transcend all barriers between every human relationship. So, we see there is the death of the individual or one's self and the birth of an artist.

For Durrell, it is life that is an illusion and we are all attempting to describe and represent it in our own different ways. We are all trapped and bound in our own emotional complexities and social ego. And it is only the human tenderness and kindness which can finally illuminate the darkness in our life and in our social relationships. Darley's development of this new insight into life is significant as he perceives it to be the truth of what he had been trying to achieve all his life. In this context, what Darley says is very significant:

I began to see too that the real "fiction" lay neither in Arnauti's pages nor Pursewarden's - nor even my own. It was life itself that was a fiction- we were all saying it in our different ways, each understanding it according to his nature and gift. (Clea: 177)

Durrell's merit lies in his ability to transform and epitomize personal experiences into a universal human philosophy presented in a fictional form. The novel effectively climaxes the theme of artistic maturity, as the narrator, Darley comes of age as an artist, a creator in his own right. It is through encountering the multi-dimensional vision and escaping the enervating influence of Alexandria that Darley achieves a regeneration which is symbolized and embodied by his art.

Darley's isolation at the end of the novel on the island with his daughter results in the transformation of his self leading to a compassionate view of life.

*The Alexandria Quartet* is remarkable as it professes to be an "emotional education" of a hero and his friends who are all artists in one way or the other, who are interested in style and technique and their work is an expression of their lives. By the end of the novel, all the characters have re-discovered themselves by challenging life and gaining a wide experience by having re-lived all those experiences. Hence, in the novel, there is a contest between man and life, between the artist and the city, Alexandria which takes on an epic scope, enlarging all who come into contact with it.

*The Alexandria Quartet* is an epic, an odyssey of the soul going through the various phases of life to the higher regions of poetry and art. If *The Prelude* records the stages in the growth of a poet's mind, *The Alexandria Quartet* sketches the progress of a novelist's mind from the darkness of an obsessive passion to the illumination of a tender human sympathy –from negation to a note of affirmation.

There is hope for man, within the boundaries of a simple law, and I seem to see mankind as gradually appropriating to itself the necessary information through mere attention, not reason, which may one day enable it to live within the terms of such an idea- the true meaning of "joy unconfined".  
(Balthazar: 239)

*The Alexandria Quartet* appears to be the result of Durrell's own struggle for meaning, reason hope and understanding of life. He seemed to grapple with the inconsistencies, failures and disappointments at his attempts to produce the utopia he continued to promise. He finally disapproved modernism and advancement of scientific knowledge and realized that the only solution was retreating within oneself to recreate anew in order to manifest in life and work the compassion and tenderness of human sympathy which only can bail out human life out of this wounded civilization.

What then is the merit and achievement of Durrell in his monumental work?

*The Alexandria Quartet* gives a totally new concept of the purpose of human existence- a philosophy that ultimately it is art and artistic creativity that will be like a salve to a wounded life and civilization. The novel will be remembered as an inspired revelation of an artist who suggests that the only solution to life is artistic creativity and belief and a desire to bring resolution and harmony into a moribund and dying society. And, what is the basis of Durrell's literary reputation, one hundred years and over twenty years after his death? It can be rightly said that Durrell lives on in his novels and through his work as a great artist- philosopher with a profound vision of life.

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