TRACING ROUSSEAU’S HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY AND SELF-LOVE IN MARA AND DANN: AN ADVENTURE (1999) BY DORIS LESSING

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ABSTRACT
The literary works by the contemporary British author, Doris Lessing (1919-2013), can be regarded as troubling and challenging narratives of women’s experience in Africa where discussions on sexuality, societal pressure and environmental problems are still ignored. More importantly, in her novel Mara and Dann: An Adventure (1999), Lessing portrays the female protagonist, Mara, as a typical young African woman who attempts to survive and overcome social and environmental problems. This study examines how Mara attempts to create a good relationship with other people and her environment, or society, while changing the world around her. Using the critical concept of perfectibility by the Genevan philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, we aim to examine the depictions of Mara’s interactions with her society and her responses to the practice of traditional cultures in African society. The methodology is based on examining Rousseau’s theodicy of self-love as a way to examine how characters attain perfectibility, namely the ability to improve and change the world. The study clarifies that Mara’s interactions with her natural environment and society play an important role in her perfectibility and improvement. When Mara achieves good connections with her society, her actions become highly intelligible and moral. She cares about others who are less fortunate than herself so she attempts to increase people’s awareness of their surroundings. She also manages to change the cultural norms and patriarchal traditions by choosing her own sexual partners. She achieves the ability to improve herself, express her ideas and make a better world for herself.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mara and Dann: An Adventure, perfectibility, self-love

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INTRODUCTION

During her youth, Doris Lessing (1919-2013), the contemporary British writer, succeeded in learning African culture when she moved to Southern Rhodesia (now known as Zimbabwe) in 1925 with her parents. Her experiences there, together with real-life information on the physical environment of the country, prevented her from describing African nature as exotic and from romanticising African people (Gendusa, 131). In time, Lessing had been known to criticise and challenge the paternalistic activities of African welfare societies which characterise Western literature set in the colonies. In most of her novels, Lessing writes about African characters who face many challenges from the effects of social and environment problems, and struggle not only to adapt but also to change their circumstances. Her writings on these characters are regarded as an effort to show human potential for improvement and perfectibility. More importantly, Lessing, in her novel, *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999), depicts dystopian societies which are run by hierarchical authorities and which are fragmented or have collapsed during centuries. In these horrible conditions, the female protagonist, Mara, consciously, or unconsciously, attempts to create deep connections with her surroundings; forced to make difficult choices in order to not only survive but also change her world and make it a better place for human beings. Mara is portrayed as an assertive woman who yearns to keep a degree of autonomy and self-realisation. Indeed, many scholars have examined important issues in *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*, namely fictional exploration and autobiographical record (Daymond, 2011), radical pedagogy (Sperlinger, 2016), ecofeminism (Aldeeb, 2017), feminism of reconciliation and social change (Mikluc, 2016), and nostalgia (Walder, 2008). Yet critics have to examine Lessing’s depictions of the characters’ abilities for achieving perfectibility and improvement in this novel.

More significantly, scholars have generally focussed only on the concept of perfectibility rather than the characters’ quests for perfectibility and progress in dystopian fictions. Le Devedec (2018), for instance, investigates the role of human action and his/her autonomy based on the philosophical notions of the Genevan philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). According to Rousseau, human beings are social and historical beings who have the ability to shape their own nature and also possess their own autonomy in order to choose their own destiny. Other scholars have investigated how the concept of self-love, or *amour-propre*, acts as a motivational role, allows individuals to establish relations with others and assists them in developing their capabilities according to Rousseau’s thought (McLendon, 2003; Neuhouser, 2008; Jubb 2011).

Concurrently, in this study, we focus on Lessing’s portrayal of an African female protagonist, Mara, in *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* as we examine her interactions with other characters in the novel and her environment, or society. We attempt to do so in order to explore the issue of human ability to achieve the idea of Rousseau’s perfectibility through self-love, also known in its original terms, *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*.

Jean Jacques Rousseau: The Philosophy of Perfectibility and Self-Love

The concept of human perfectibility through intellect is an important subject which goes back to medieval times, and was specifically developed in the 17th and 18th centuries by Rousseau. In the medieval and Aristotelian ages (384-322 BC), human perfection is closely related to an individual’s happiness, defined by Aristotle as “the perfection of human nature”, “the actualisation of the possibilities inherent in man” (Wieland, 1982). Aristotle considers human intellect as the highest virtue and goodness as he points out that the real prosperity and happy
life are the result of the perfection of an individual’s intellect and character, and they are basically contained within the power of human beings (Hosseini et al., 2016). In Aristotle’s account, to understand human happiness, we need to understand human nature and their relation to the world around them. This also includes human impact and influences on the world as well as the purpose of the creation of humans and the universe (Hosseini et al., 2016). In particular, Rousseau and the Scottish philosopher Lord Monboddo (1714–1799) define perfectibility as “the power of self-rule and moral progress” (Blackburn 2005). Rousseau, in his Discourse on the Origin of Inequality (1755), clarifies that human interaction with the natural environment and society has an important role in relation to their perfectibility and improvement.

While self-love, or known originally as *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, is often associated with Rousseau, there are also other thinkers and philosophers who have expounded on the merits of the concept. For example, Bernard de Mandeville (1670-1733), the Anglo-Dutch philosopher, distinguished two kinds of passion in human nature: self-love, or self-interest, and self-liking, or pride. Mandeville, in the *The Fable of the Bess* (1714), depicts a society which is possessed of all virtues, completely paralysed and destroyed, and realises that the absence of self-love in society means the death of progress. Ultimately, human selfish desire and pride are the cause of all the misery and misfortunes in the world (Tolonen 2009). Indeed, the Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), like Mandeville and other Dutch philosophers, adopted the idea that humans possess two selfish passions which “need to be regulated by strict rules in order to be cultivated, the direct ‘passion of self-interest’ and the indirect passion of pride” (Tolonen 2009, p. 250). On the contrary, Force (1997) posits the view that, in Rousseau’s moral system, *amour de soi* is unlimited and tyrannical, and it is the instinctive characteristic of humans for self-preservation. Meanwhile *amour-propre* is an artificial need that develops with the appearance of society and effectively improves and elevates human lives. These views, among others, have emphasised the importance of perfectibility and self-love in which these concepts give humans the power of self-determination and moral progress. Here, Lessing introduces to her readers a deep connection between human character and environment through Mara, the protagonist, who learns through her observations of places and people without proper schooling (Daymond, 2011). In the novel, human indetermination and autonomy, which Lessing attempts to convey, transpire when the environment and societies have undergone many changes, where humans have the potential to act properly in order to change their situations and progress morally.

This study also adds significant new and original contributions to research on perfectibility and self-love in society in a number of ways. Firstly, the general contribution of my study is that I will demonstrate the application of a conceptual framework for analysing the author’s depiction of human interaction and development in a dystopian world of the novel, *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*. Secondly, my understanding of these two variables have shown a dearth in scholarship which focuses on human characters’ quest for perfectibility and self-love in dystopian fictions. Thirdly, the study uses a post-apocalyptic novel which is set in a far distant future affected by social and environmental changes. Such new recent study brings about a better understanding of the factors, which play a vital role in understanding the concept of perfectibility and self-love.

**METHODOLOGY**

In this study, we focus on the novel *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* by Lessing set in the far distant future, in the aftermath of an Ice Age which has destroyed centuries of civilisation and
wreaked massive destruction on the social systems of the southern hemisphere, including Africa (now known as Ifrik). The novel is suitable for this study as it focuses on the lives of female characters in a dystopian world of Africa as we aim to examine the literary representation of characters and their functions in a disintegrated society. Rousseau’s concepts of perfectibility and self-love are imperative for this study as they highlight the human’s capacity for development and change with the aid of environment, as we aim to show how human beings can create moral relations among themselves, attain a higher level of consciousness as social beings; and consequently act wisely and freely in order to make a better world. More importantly, our study has applied a hermeneutic textual analysis of the female protagonist’s ability for perfectibility through a close reading of Mara and Dann: An Adventure. The concept of perfectibility and its relation to the passion of self-love, or *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, by Rousseau in his book *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* are applied in this study to examine Mara’s ability to change, to improve and also to influence the world as an African woman living in a patriarchal and totalitarian society. Specifically, the concepts of perfectibility and self-love explicate the improvements of Mara through her behaviour, attitude and ideas, and her interactions with other people as well as her responses to her surroundings in the course of the narrative. We will also investigate the cultural norms and patriarchal traditions which exist in the dystopian society of the novel.

**Perfectibility and Self-Love**

In this section, we will discuss the concepts of perfectibility and self-love, *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, as conceptualised by Rousseau in his book, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. According to Rousseau, perfectibility is a characteristic of human beings that distinguishes humans from other creatures, whereby humans can improve, learn and to be educated through the aid of the environment. Rousseau’s perspectives rely on the investigation of the human autonomy and action in a natural state and civil society. In his view, natural or original humans act based on their natural needs and passions, *amour de soi*, in order to preserve their beings (Rousseau 2012, p. 39). When humans enter society, they develop and “acquire new needs and passions especially passions such as pride that make [them] dependent on [their] fellow human beings, [they] [might] become ‘wicked’ in the sense that [their] impulses no longer lead to [their] happiness” (Rousseau 2012, p. 39). For Rousseau, humans create moral relations among themselves and begin to realise their duties in society that might be either good or evil. Human transitions from the natural world to civil society produces a shift in their characters as they replace instinct with justice and make up for the lack of morality in their actions (Rousseau 2012, p. 426). The humans’ capacity for such a transformation in their nature is what Rousseau calls perfectibility. Rousseau argues that, when human beings reach the consciousness of themselves as social beings, they can act rationally and wisely. He defines two rational faculties in humans, namely understanding and the other, as reason. Rousseau also discusses two kinds of reasons, namely childish, sensible reason and intellectual, human reason. This latter separation is similar to the former and the main difference concerns the object. As Kontio clarifies:

> whereas the object for understanding, or sensible reason, is the physical world, the object of reason is the intellectual world. The former rationality formulates the comparative ideas of the physical, measurable objects like smaller, bigger and so on. The latter,
instead, formulates the comparative ideas of purely intellectual non-measurable objects like goodness, justice, moral beauty and moral order (Kontio 2012, p. 35).

As we can see, Rousseau’s notion of reason is two-dimensional. Firstly, the notion of understanding is related to the physical human and even, to a certain extent, to animals. Reason, as Kontio describes, “is the form of rationality that belongs only to human beings; it does not at all serve the needs raised by nature but is instead a form of rationality that forms the rule of and guide to those needs” (2012, p. 35). The creation of this form of rationality is the task of moral education that arises from nature and its aim is to cultivate reason so that it can provide moral order to those demands.

Rousseau also argues that humans have the potential for perfectibility so they must create the conditions for their improvement. He imagines how humans and the large-scale society might be affected by “external and extrinsic causes, such as climate or natural disasters or overpopulation” (Rousseau 2012, p. 69). This then makes humans communicate with each other and therewith, create the conditions for their development. Rousseau, in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and his other critical writings, focuses on the themes of perfectibility and self-love along with freedom in which he attempts to justify human nature and the role of self-love within it. *Amour de soi*, or self-respect, is a natural sentiment which assists humans to satisfy their needs and which are guided by reason. It is also modified by pity and creates humanity and true virtue. On the other hand, *amour-propre* is an artificial sentiment born in society and which is the source of honour as well as evil in human beings. According to Rousseau, *amour-propre*:

plays both a cognitive and a motivational role, in allowing us to discover who we are within a community of equal moral agents, and also why we have good grounds for acting morally. Concerning motivation, Rousseau described the process whereby one acquires the moral point of view, as one first universalises one’s natural feeling of pity for those less fortunate than oneself, and then focuses one’s compassion through the filter of conscience, until one bestows pity on all and only those who deserve it. This ‘transforms it [pity] into virtue’ (O’Hagan 2010, p. 220).

Pity leads man to sociability and then to morally worthy behaviours. Through this transition, we realise how to judge ourselves based on the opinion of others. When individuals have reached the consciousness of themselves as social beings, morality also becomes possible and this relies on the further faculty of conscience.

Accordingly, self-love, *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, plays a motivational role in human moral relationships and progress. For Rousseau, we can guide *amour-propre* through moral education if we “present … [a child] only with situations in which, when he compares himself with others, he finds compassion for others’ suffering and the impulse to improve himself” (Schwitzgebel 2007, p. 24). In other words, one acquires the feelings of pity and compassion for other human beings as one attains self-consciousness and rationality. Rousseau believes that children must be free to observe themselves and their surroundings through their sensations as these senses are the first instrument of knowledge for them. In this sense, “the sensory experiences of the child would be the basis for his future moral and intellectual education” (Poonacha 2016, p. 420).
Notable studies on *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* have been conducted by Daymond (2011), Mikluc (2016) and Aldeeb (2017). In particular, Daymond points out that Lessing “place[s] the essential source of knowledge not in records of any kinds, but in individual power of observation and analysis” (Daymond 2011, p. 88) where the human character studies and learn through people and places without proper schooling. In addition, Mikluc also argues that Lessing, in *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*, focuses on women’s political and social challenges, as faced in the society and how they permanently try to overcome “both socially imposed and self-imposed limitation” (Mikluc 2016, p. 209). On the other hand, Aldeeb examines the social and environmental problems and, likewise, the connection between human and nature, specifically women with nature through ecofeminism. Aldeeb also suggests that Lessing, in *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*, has implicitly asked readers for social change “which must be made by all members of the society” (Aldeeb 2017, p. 81). While these studies have focused on various important issues, namely women empowerment and the environment, less focus has been given on Mara’s quest and self-journey to achieve perfectibility in the narrative.

Concurrently, we hypothesise that, in *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*, the female protagonist possesses the ability to improve and to change her world through the application of the theoretical concepts of Rousseau on perfectibility and self-love, *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*. We also hypothesise that Mara is a powerful character who can face many challenges stemming from the effects of social and environment problems, and also criticise cultural norms and the patriarchal system of her society in order to change them.

**Human Perfectibility and Self-Love in Mara and Dann: An Adventure: Mara’s Power of Self-Determination and Progress**

*Mara and Dann: An Adventure* depicts the condition of various societies and tribes that have undergone great environmental and social changes. The dystopian situation of the novel represents a kind of complex relationships between its human characters as well as human characters and the environment. Mara, the protagonist, like others, is forced to make a deep connection with her surroundings in order to survive. She is eager to learn more about her surroundings; whether about the natural world or her society. She, for instance, wants to know why everything has changed: the climate has worsened, the river, dried and disappeared, and even most of the animals have changed into strange beasts. Mara tries to learn from her surroundings and change her world or, in other words, she shows the potential to improve herself, to shape and to be shaped by her environment - what Rousseau calls perfectibility or the capacity for rational self-determination (Rousseau 2012, p. 60).

Rousseau’s perfectibility emphasises that human beings are naturally good, not characterised by their ability of acting free and rationally, as ancient philosophers have traditionally believed but, instead, by their very perfectibility – a capacity that makes them want to learn and be educated by their environment. Lessing’s portrayal of Mara depicts her degree of interaction with her environment and society from early childhood to adulthood. Mara, as a child, is free to observe her surroundings, where she wants to know more about the ruined city, or the animals, which exists in the Rock Village. Here, she asks Daima where “they’ve just gone.... And they were here for so long.... And we don’t know their names or anything” (Lessing 1999, p. 58). She also observes the animals around her and looks at how they live and what they eat in the Rock Village. Through her powers of observation and physical sensation, Mara learns about her descendants and the world which can be referred to Rousseau’s idea that human sensation is the first instrument of knowledge for a child. Her physical and mental
improvements become apparent when Mara can successfully meet enormous environmental and social challenges in the span of her life time. She, for instance, can battle drought and famine, and also take care of her first guardian, Daima, who was sick. From the above examples, we also discover that Lessing focuses deeply upon the interaction between the self and the world, and the process in which humans interact with the world.

As discussed earlier, human beings have the potential for improvement and change but that potential cannot develop without the aid of environment. For Rousseau, human development depends largely on “external and extrinsic causes”, such as natural and environmental cataclysms which make humans interact with one another and, therewith, create the circumstance for their development (Rousseau, p. 69). Rousseau proposes that individuals bond together; first the family and then civil societies are established, and other faculties in humans, such as self-consciousness, morality and language, progress under those changed circumstances. Lessing, in *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*, depicts a number of societies which undergo social and environment changes. The characters face environmental issues, namely drought and famine, in the central and southern areas of Ifrik. Mara is aware of the changing world around her, and tries to adapt and grow. Mara’s belief, attitude and act of making choices in the face of dire circumstances show that she can build a good connection with not only her environment but also other characters in her society in order to learn and improve. For instance, Mara, during her stay in Chelops, easily communicates and works with Mahondi slaves, particularly the female slaves, wherefrom she learns about her ancestors and the way they have ruled Ifrik. As Mara grows mentally and physically, she starts to criticise the cultural norms and patriarchal traditions, and tries to change them. She deploys the Mahondi people and asks them to change the cultural norms and hierarchal systems of society, which exist in the society of Chelops, where a great number of people are slaves and where women are subordinated to the men and identified by their bodies. They are also treated as breeding stock because fertility is rare. In the narrative, Mara speaks with the Mahondi people about these changes, where she:

began an impassioned plea that they must leave, leave Chelops, while they still could. ‘You can take a lot of food and cloths; it won’t be a hardship, as it was for us. Please leave – I don’t know why I can’t make you see it.’ They were looking at each other, doubtful and serious but she was afraid they were already deciding not to listen (Lessing 1999, p. 185).

Here, we realise that Mara has improved mentally as she asks them to take action, change their world and make their own destiny. We may propose here that Lessing supports Rousseau’s idea of human evolution in which human beings are social animals who are subject to changing world around them; so, they cannot stand outside of evolutionary changes (Stillman, 2013). At best, they can choose, improve and shape the world in which these evolutionary changes work. In the novel, contrary to the Mahondi people, Mara and her brother, Dann, can cope with not only environmental and social changes but also a variety of cultural differences which require adaptability, strength and growth.

As argued previously, human capacities for freedom and perfectibility are activated within the context of society through their acts of social interactions with other citizens. Rousseau views that:
whenever human beings live together and are capable of making comparisons and judgments of value—which is to say, whenever human subjects exist—they are moved by the desire to be valued by others and by a concern to be seen by them as occupying a favourable position among their fellow beings (Neuhouser 2008, p. 34).

In this sense, we also observe that Mara finds her true self through engaging in a network of relationships within the communities she is forced to stay with, such as the Mahondi community in Chelops and the community of prostitutes in Bilma. Mara’s act of connection with others corresponds to Rousseau’s concept of *amour-propre* which appears within society and which is capable of improving and elevating individual lives and society. The sentiment of *amour-propre* motivates Mara to compare herself with her fellow citizens and search for equality within society as a woman and as a human being. She, for instance, can choose her sexual partner. In this sense, she can get a degree of freedom and agency among the Mahondi people in the city of Chelops, which helps her to make a better world by changing the role of female sexuality (Lessing 1999, p. 182). Mara’s act of making a better society corresponds to this idea that:

Owing to perfectibility, human beings are not only able to work on themselves: by improving their abilities, they are also able to change their environment (both social and natural) and create favourable conditions for their existence (Ugleva & Vinogradova 2019, p. 113).

Mara’s perfectibility comes from her sense of self-love, or *amour de soi*, which assists her to overcome a whole lot of challenges during her journey to the Centre. Mara can battle starvation, slavery, drought and famine in order to preserve her own life. As Mara develops a good relationship with the Mahondi slaves and, later, with other communities in the novel, her natural passion, or *amour de soi*, is guided by reason and intellect which is called *amour-propre*. In other words, she becomes an intellectual and rational human being who can improve her potential talents and abilities. Once Mara expresses her true desire, she compares her condition with her fellow Mahondi slaves because she is aware of her constraints pertaining to education. She expresses her lack of knowledge in a conversation with the Shabis as seen below:

‘You don’t know what it’s like, knowing you’re so ignorant, not knowing anything … And I did know more—but what I really knew more about was not the kind of thing I want to learn. I know about how to stay alive. And they don’t.’ (Lessing 1999, p. 248).

Here, *amour-propre* plays a motivational role that allows Mara to discover who she is within the community of the Mahondis, to attain more knowledge and to act morally. Little by little she can improve her abilities in order to change and to be changed by her circumstances. Mara feels compassion for the Mahondi slaves who would rather live in their own hierarchical society than change and make a better world. She tries to make the Mahondi people aware of their surroundings and to encourage them to change their living situations. In this sense, her feelings of pity for other human beings lead “to morally worthy behaviour” (Jack 1978, p. 122). As Mara attains consciousness of herself as a free social being, morality becomes possible and this relies on the further faculty of conscience.
In yet another example from the novel, Lessing depicts Mara’s intellectual ability and perfectibility when Mara criticises the conflict and competition among the Rock People. In the extract below, she is speaking to Daima, her first guardian, about the Rock People:

‘That means someone meant to kill it.’
‘Yes, I think so.’
‘That means that they fight each other-the Rock People.’
‘Yes, they do. There are families who won’t speak each other.’
Suddenly Mara giggled, and Daima seemed surprised. Mara quickly said,
‘We haven’t enough water. We only have a little food. But they quarrel.’ (Lessing 1999, p. 46)

The above conversation shows Mara’s intellectual development and ability to criticise why the Rock People are enemies who fight each other in these circumstances. For Mara, it is illogical that people are fighting each other instead of being united and helping each other times of drought and famine. As seen earlier, Mara naturally reveals her feelings of pity and compassion for the Mahondi people that extends her sociability and morally worthy behaviours. Mara’s deep relationship with the Mahondi people enables her to be a free individual whose intellect guides her amour-propre into its healthy and natural form. The healthy amour-propre appears in Mara as a desire for recognition and having an equal status with other citizens, and consequently assists her to go against the cultural norms of her society by expressing her feelings, choosing her own sexual partner and later choosing to marry Shabis (Lessing 1999, p. 182).

Through her constant relationship with different communities and circumstances, Mara achieves self-consciousness, rationality and morality, which come from her passion of amour-propre. As she attains consciousness of herself, she attempts to use her personal potential and to act morally in the face of different circumstances. For instance, when she is sold to a brothel by her brother to pay off his debts in Bilma, she refuses to be a prostitute like other women. In this sense, she reveals her true self as an independent woman, who expresses her ideas, makes her own choices and decides to marry Daulis instead of finding a way to escape on her own (Lessing, 1999, p. 335). She also tries to increase the prostitutes’ consciousness of the world around them by telling them stories about Africa and her descendants, and to encourage them to make a better future for themselves.

Generally, in her interactions with her society and surroundings, Mara can exercise and develop her abilities, express her ideas, ennoble her feelings and elevate her soul. Mara’s intellect and perfectibility assists her to attain self-consciousness and rationality, giving her actions morality and virtue. As discussed before, Mara feels pity for the Mahondi slaves which makes her care about them. She has realised that she, as a human being, has the power to deploy the Mahondi people and encourage them to change the cultural norms and patriarchal traditions. To change the situation of her society, Mara, first of all, tries to revise the cultural norms by choosing her own sexual partner. Then, she tries to increase the people’s consciousness of their surroundings, to make them believe they have the ability to improve themselves, to change and to be changed by their environment and, consequently, to persuade them to make a better world for themselves. At the end of the novel, Lessing’s portrayal of Mara shows that she can not only improve her potential but also make choices in which she and Dann establish a small, self-sufficient agrarian community on the northern coast with a small group of people.
CONCLUSION

Our analyses of Mara have explored the issues of human character difficulties and challenges in a disintegrated society of Africa. Through utilising the concepts of perfectibility and theodicy of self-love by Rousseau, our analyses have helped to reveal that Mara, as a young African female living in socially and economically disintegrated societies, manifests potential abilities and perfectibility through her ideas and her acts of establishing good relationships with the communities she is forced to stay with as characterised mainly by the Mahondi slaves with their own political and cultural beliefs. Mara has been able to develop a good relationship with the Mahondi slaves, to learn and to be educated by them and her surroundings since she has lived with these people for many years. Mara’s perfectibility is further manifested when she comes across the community of prostitutes who are locked in a sexual world. This horrible situation has pushed her to make difficult choices and learn how to confront her own issues when she is forced to stay with such an oppressed community.

Subsequently, we found that Mara’s sense of perfectibility is evident in the narrative: Mara’s effort to express her own ideas and pursue her desires, thereby magnifying her abilities and power to improve and attain perfectibility. Mara exhibits a sense of self-consciousness and morality as she criticises the cultural norms of her society and reacts to what happens around her. She encourages the Mahondi people and the other communities to change the hierarchal system of societies in order to make a better future. Mara also demonstrates her autonomy to make choices in the face of different circumstances that also represent her attempt to gain equality in the society as a free autonomous individual chooses her sexual partner in Chelops, thus finding her voice and going against the cultural norms and the hierarchal system of societies created on social discrimination and gender inequality. Interestingly, the passion of amour-propre that is recognised as an important factor in human perfectibility can be observed through Mara’s ideas and attitudes - she can criticise the tyranny of her society and change it since she has been able to develop a good rapport with the society, and to learn and be educated by them and her surroundings. Besides, Mara’s ability to face enormous environmental and social challenges in the course of the narrative shows her ability to achieve progress and perfectibility.

In reference to the objective of this study, we can safely conclude that our analyses of Mara’s interactions with other people and her environment, reveal renegotiation of social and political challenges of a female protagonist through the application of the concepts of perfectibility and self-love by Rousseau. When economic inequality, social division and (gender/race) discrimination are rampant in most of societies, a good understanding of these two concepts would assist humans to master their own autonomy despite their circumstances and change their world. The significance of these two variables is to assist readers towards understanding their potential abilities and their powers, and properly use them in order to improve and elevate their life.

In general, the study would broaden our views toward life as we learn more about human characteristics and potential abilities through analysis of Rousseau’s theoretical philosophy. As we study this manuscript, we understand that we need to work on ourselves by improving our abilities in order to attain the power to change our circumstances and make a better world. We are also motivated by our desire for recognition and equal rights as other citizens which lead to our personal growth and more autonomy in our life.
This study is, however, limited to Lessing’s portrayal of Mara in *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* and the conceptual framework of perfectibility and self-love by Rousseau. Thus, further research may be conducted on other selected characters in other literary works by Lessing, such as Dann in *The Story of General Dann and Mara’s Daughter* (2005), which is the sequel to *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*, and set in futurist Africa. In addition, more research might explore the concept of perfectibility by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) or the concept of moral perfectionism by the contemporary thinker Stanley Cavell (1926-2018).

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