



A study of Race and Gender Politics in Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing

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Abstract-- Doris Lessing, one of the most significant postcolonial writers, made her debut as a novelist with *The Grass Is Singing* (1950). The novel examines the relationship between Mary Turner, a white farmer's wife, and her black African servant in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) during the 1940s. The novel does not only deal with racial politics between whites and blacks, but also explores feminist issues. Moreover, the description of Mary Turner merits closer examination on account of Lessing's incomparable depictions of the female psyche in the midst of restrictions imposed by gender, race and class. Core themes of the novel include a failed marriage, the sexual obsessions mainly on the part of whites, and the fear of black power and revenge which still pervade today while the British Colonial past is only a memory.

Keywords-- *Rhodesia, feminism, racism, colonialism, postcolonial, social issues.*

The Grass is Singing is the first novel, published in 1950, by British Nobel Prize-winning author Doris Lessing. It takes place in Southern Rhodesia, in southern Africa, during the 1940's and deals with the racial politics between Whites and Blacks in that country. Doris Lessing, born of British parents in Persia (now Iran). In 1990 she spent her childhood in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) since she was five and went to England in 1949. Published in 1950 it is her first novel which gave outstanding success in Britain, America and other European countries in which resulted in her international reputation. This novel opens with a very brief newspaper account of the murder of a White lady, Mary Turner, wife of Richard Dick Turner, a farmer in southern Rhodesia. It states that the black house boy has been arrested and he has confessed to the crime. The newspaper holds that the boy was in search of valuables. Then the novel moves to describe the inquiry into the murder by the neighbors and the colonial officials. The rest of the novel concerns the story of Mary's childhood, her life in town, her ambivalence towards marriage and sexual affair, her marriage with Dick Turner and unhappy conjugal life, her strict behavior with Dick Turner and unhappy conjugal life, her strict behavior with the native workers, her relation with the black houseboy Moses, the Slatters, Tony Marston and her murder by her own houseboy.

The novel gives a realistic sense of slavery in South Africa during the Apartheid period. There is a lot of tension and division between the Blacks and Whites. There is a very intense distaste towards the Black in the time, as they were not even thought of as human beings and were oppressed with the British rule. This happened

in many 14 places, including in India before we got our independence. The fact that the book is written by a British author is also a bit controversial as it is coming through the eyes of a White author, sympathizing towards the Blacks slavery. There are many instances in the book which is left to readers and is abstract, for example when Mary dies and Moses kills her. It is very abstract and confusing for the reader. It depicts the Black/White romance and bridging the gap between races as it seems that Mary is attracted to Moses. This is a story about hate, humiliation and revenge, a story about lost hopes and frustration, set in southern Rhodesia houseboy, now known as Zimbabwe. It centers on the murder of a White farmer's wife by her Black houseboy, a crime fueled by the institutional racism that pervades 1940 s Rhodesia. The novel has a unique structure in which the first chapter deals with the murder and local reaction to it, then slips into an extended flashback in order to explain the circumstance behind the crime. Mary Turner is a self-confident, independent young woman who becomes the depressed, frustrated wife of an enigmatic and virile Black servant. It ends as a disturbing tale of racial strife in colonial South Africa.

The title is taken from a poem called "The Wasteland" written by T.S Eliot (1922) quoted after the novel's dedication to a Mrs. Gladys Masdorp "of Southern Rhodesia for whom I feel the greatest affection and admiration". Found on both lines 354 and 3386 of part V: what the thunder said, it is one of the more jubilant and reviving images used in that section, despite its theme of destructions power over growth. Lessing also quotes an anonymous author: "it is by the failures and misfits of a civilization that one can best judge its weakness." When *The Grass is Singing* it 15 means that it is hot and then the cicadas (krekels) make a lot of noise. Mary Turner hates hot weather and hates the noise it indicates way of her life. The life which she never expected. Doris Lessing wrote her novels with strong themes such as disillusionment, more specifically, political disillusionment is a recurring theme in the stories of Lessing and even more so, in her novel. The gap between political idealism and actual practice creates a psychic dislocation for many Lessing's characters that inexorably leads to disillusionment. Time and again in Lessing's short stories, the best intentions of characters are hampered by what is typically an obstacle in most fiction, but an obstacle which is destined to be overcome: romance.

The novel *The Grass is Singing* is from the third person omniscient point of view, albeit with some-what limited



perspective. To be specific, the narration focuses with almost complete exclusivity on the thoughts, feelings and motivation of its White characters. The Black characters, who are admitted secondary in narrative importance, receive little or no attention in the narration for their thoughts and feelings. Chapter 3 Analyzing the Theme Race and Gender in the Novel *The Grass is Singing* is the first novel, published in 1950, by British Nobel prize-winning author Doris Lessing. It takes place in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in Southern Africa, during the late 1940s and deals with the racial politics between Whites and Blacks in that country which was then a British colony. The novel created a sensation when it was first published and become an instant success in Europe and United States. The novel is set in South Africa, which at the time the action unfolds was populated and governed according to the rules of apartheid, institutionalized racism in which the White minority was socially, legally and politically dominant over the Black majority. The book is perhaps the most interesting when the author describes the ideology of White colonists in Africa. In particular the idea that extreme racism develops out a need to justify economic exploitation is poignantly posed. It is not that White oppress Blacks because they hate them, rather they hate them because they have to oppress them and deny their human worth to maintain their standard of living. Thus, new comers from Britain must be taught how to deal with a feel about the natives, and poor Whites are despised because they seem to blur the color lines. "People all over the country...felt a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction as if some beliefs have been confirmed...when natives steals, murder or rape, that is the feeling White people have (pp.1). " the native police man did not have to search for the murderer.

After walking through the house, looking briefly at the body, and dispersing down the front of the little hill the house stood on, they saw Moses himself rise out of a tangled anti-heap in front of them. He walked up to them and said: 'Here I am' (pp.6). They snapped the handcuffs on him and went back to the house to wait for the police cars to come. People did ask curiously, why the murderer had given himself up? There was not much chance of escape, but he did have a sporting chance. He could have run to the hills and hidden for a while. Or he could have slipped over the borders to the Portuguese territory. Then the district native commissioner, at a sundowner party, said was it was perfectly understandable. If one know anything about the history of the country, or had read any of the memories or letters of the old missionaries and explorers, one would have come across the account of the society Lobengula ruled. It was tradition to face the punishments, and really there was something rather fine about it. The laws were strict: In the old society everyone knew what they could or could not do. If someone did an unforgiveable thing, like touching one of the king's women, he would submit

fatalistically. No punishment, which was likely to be impalement over an ant heap on a stake, or something equally unpleasant. I have done wrong and I knew it; he might sit there for let me be punished (pp.6). Mary, like most Rhodesian women, is overtly racist, believing that Whites should be masters over the native Blacks. Dick and Mary both often complain about the lack of work ethic among the natives that work on their farm. While Dick is rarely cruel to the workers that work for them, Mary is quit cruel. She treats herself as their master and superior. She shows contempt for the natives, and finds them disgusting and animal-like; Mary's cross, queenly, and overtly hostile to the many house servants that she has over the years. When Mary oversees the farm labor, she is much more repressive than Dick had ever been. She makes them harder, reduces their break time and arbitrarily takes money from their pay. Her hatred of natives results in whipping the face of a worker because he spoke to her in English, asking her for water. This worker, named Moses comes to be a very important person in Mary's life, when he is taken to be a servant for the house. Mary does not feel fear of her servant Moses but rather the great deal of disgust, repugnance and avoidance. After many years living on the farm together, Dick and Mary are seen in a condition of the deterioration. Mary often goes through spells of depression, during which she is exhausted of energy and motivation. As Mary becomes weaker, she finds herself feeling endearment towards Moses. On a rare visit from her neighbor, Slatter, Mary is seen being carelessly, thoughtlessly kind to Moses this enrages Slatter. Slatter demands that Mary should not live with that worker as a house servant. Slatter sees himself as defending the values and integrity of white community. Slatter uses his charisma and influence to convince Dick to give up ownership of his farm and go on a vacation with this wife. Dick spends his last month on his farm with Tony, who has been hired by slatter to take over the running of the farm. Tony has good intentions and is very superficially cultured, but he find himself having to adapt to the racism of the white community. One day Tony sees Moses' dressing Mary and is surprised, somewhat amazed by Mary's breaking of the 'color war.' *The Grass is Singing* is self-conscious novel that deconstructs the two storied edifices of apartheid and domestic bliss. It is not significant to Lessing's purpose here that the heroine is destroyed by a combination of racial mythologies and domestic fictions. For both, to one degree or another, dehumanize their participants by forcing them to function less an individual's than ideas.

Thus, it is central to the twisted mythology of apartheid that blacks are racially and incorrigibly to whites, and assumption that inspires all sorts of neurotic vigilance among the whites who must constantly monitor one another to maintain the myth of their own superiority. It is central to the feminine mystic that women find happiness and identity only in marriage, where they subordinate themselves to their husband. As a classic



example of metafiction, Lessing's text simultaneously invokes and deconstructs these two social myths that bring her heroine not the status they promise but only grief and pain. While Lessing describes neuroticism of both sexes' contemporary society, she shows women failing more massively than men, their failure being rooted in a self-limiting need for romantic love. In order to feel loved the women must see herself as "Feminine or passive and male as masculine or dominant. This attitude is illustrated in *The Grass is Singing*, in which Lessing portrays a young wife, Mary Turner deliberately refusing whital participation, joint work effort, as "she needed a man stronger than herself, and she was trying to create one out of Dick. If he had genuinely...taken the ascendancy over her, she would have loved him and no longer hated herself for becoming tied to a failure." (pp. 45) This is a recurrent theme, and a primary source of failure, in Lessing's work – women's need to learn, her need for the illusion of having a real man, a protector acting as buffer between her and reality. Lessing's female protagonist is refusal of economic responsibility for herself is perhaps the source of other refusal, emotional and moral, even the responsibility for an identity. Once he is back, her psychological problems become severe that she no longer acts as a white person is "supposed" to act in racist south Africa. At this point her society's defense mechanism automatically clicks in to place, leaving her lost and vulnerable. Under the circumstances, the person left for her to turn to his 20 Moses, her black house servant, with whom he develops a forbidden, Latently, sexual relationship. Bizarre as the relationship becomes, it does involve some expression of simple human kindness. But because fiction of apartheid is nothing if not over perverse, Mary is not allowed seeking comfort from her black servant-even after all the Whites have deserted her. Having broken the rule, she must be punished. And the punishment is death at her servant's hand. Although it is true that Mary suffers from severe mental disorders and Moses motives are never spelled out, her death is a direct result of their forbidden friendship. In short Mary is acceptable to her society for as long as she working she is willing to inhabit political fictions apartheid and maintain the appearance of marital happiness. When she rejects this fiction by preferring the company of her black house boy to that of her husband, Mary sentences herself to death. Her murder, therefore, serves the double purpose of vindicating her society's fear of black violence and silencing a dangerous non-conformist. As far as Mary is concerned, the victory of her white society is unconditional, sealed by her death. But as far as Lessing's readers are concerned, it is an empty victory.

Although all of Mary's neighbor's near and far, rally round in their common fears, we as readers do not share their condemnation of the poor women. We joined Lessing in condemning Mary's society. In so doing we joined her in the constructing the institution of apartheid and the midst that would sustain it. Lessing has exposed

the absolute corruption central to the fiction of apartheid by using the Black servant to enforce the white code. The bitter irony in the Lessing's story is just this: Mary goes insane and is murdered precisely because she abided by social conventions. It is true, of course, that she does break her racist culture's code of behavior of White. For this she can be expecting punishment and is murdered finally. But because breaking the code means treating the Black person both for honoring and breaking illusion. She cannot win. Thus *The Grass is Singing* reveals itself as metafiction, reminding us of the punishment it store for those who violates society's fondest fictions of racial superiority. And in its tragic conclusion, when Moses murders Mary, the book effectively lays bare the illusion of marital happiness and that the fictions that would maintain it. For it is as clear as anything that Mary welcomes this release from bondage.

The Grass is Singing is to some degree autobiographical. Doris Lessing grew up in southern Rhodesia and there can be no doubt that this novel's characters and this character mindsets first found life not in miss Lessing's world, but in Lessing's compatriots and classmates. It is clear she has known these people, for she still knows not just what they think, but how they think. Her narrative very sardonically, very accurately conveys the racist outlook of her characters. The novel is intensely humane in its attentiveness to the minutest details of mental life of this Central character: her small mindedness and her ambitions, her silent range at her comprehending husband, her longing for the life of small town where she had worked as a secretary before her marriage. As her mind goes and her husband becomes more and more distant, she begins a sexual dalliance - its true scope only hinted at never quite clear - with Moses. And when, near the end, caught in a moment of intimacy with him by a white neighbor, she dismisses, this black man disrespectfully, we understand - we know it is not our business to forgive this betrayal of the only human meaning in the withered landscape of her existence. White women are objectified as unattainable property of white men through stereotyping the native men as violent, savage and sexually threatening.

These double strategies both take the individuality from white women and colonize them as sexual objects always in danger and in need of the heroic protection of their white men, and help the white men overcome their fear and jealousy for the superior sexual potency of the black men. The patriarchal myth of white woman as white man's property and symbol of his power and the "forbidden fruits" for black man expels woman from subjective roles by imposing upon them the view that they are unable to handle the black laborer. Therefore, the white women are convinced that they cannot share power with the white men. Mary's realization of her sterile situation is too late and has no other remedy but death. Her recognition is in her death. She sees herself as an angular, ugly, pitiful woman, with nothing left of the



life that can do nothing in front of the "fatal night" Even her end is a gendered one; being taught to be selfless, she feels guilty in her attempt to find her true sexual self and does not see the power to complete herself, so her search ends in self-annihilation. She is unable to protest herself against pain and punishment because she has been taught that resistance is useless-to be a woman is to be powerless, at least in relation to a man". Her gender role makes her act the role of a sacrificial victim by permitting the bush Africa or Moses - to revenge the whole colonialism on her. Her readiness for self-sacrifice signifies her stereotype gender role. Her life and death show that she has been imprisoned in her culture's image of woman - dependent, helpless, a sacrificial colonized. At the beginning of the novel, she wanted to save herself by means marriage but it did not work either: "Yes: long, long ago, she had turned towards another young man, a young man from a farm, when she was in trouble and had not known what to do. It had seemed to her that she would be saved from herself by marrying him".

Now the situation is different but her feelings are similar: "There was nothing new even in her death. The most important is her failure, is revealed only a few moments before she dies: "She 23 would walk out her road alone, she thought. That was the lesson she had to learn. If she had learned it, long ago, she would not be standing here now, having been betrayed for the second time by her weak reliance on a human being who should not be expected to take the responsibility for her". (pp.212) It would have been better if she had stayed in the town as an unmarried woman and had lived her life on her own independently of others. Eventually, she regrets everything and feels "defenseless She regrets the fact that she had depended so much on other people and thus could not free herself.

On the other hand, she finds out that it is impossible to be alienated from others She feels the irrational need to

become a part of a certain community and to be able to act as an individual at the same time. The novel thus records Mary's total failure to survive on the levels of the self, society and race. Moses however can be said to enjoy in a very special sense, borderline success in surviving. Conclusion *The Grass is Singing* is a novel by the Nobel Prize-winning British author Doris Lessing. It centers on the murder of a white farmer's wife by her black houseboy, a crime fueled by the institutionalized racism that pervades 1940s Rhodesia. The novel reflects its author's disapproval of sexual and political prejudices and colonialism. On the surface, it seems a personal and psychological portrayal of a female protagonist from childhood to death but seen as a whole, it is the political exposure of the futility and fragility of the patriarchal and colonial society upon which the masculinity of imperialism has sustained itself.

The whole novel can be seen as Mary's struggle towards individuation to preserve her authenticity and sense of self but it fails because of the psychological and political forces which furnish her little insight into her condition and threaten to crush her. Oxford English dictionary term

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