



DORIS LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING* AND POST-COLONIALISM

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ABSTRACT

*Doris Lessing is 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 during the 1940s. The novel does not only deal with racial politics between whites and blacks, but also explore 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.*

Key words: Postcolonial, British Colonial.

INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing is a British writer who was born in 1919 in Kermanshah, Iran. She published her first novel *The Grass is Singing* in England in 1950. The title of this novel was taken from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This title is included in these lines:

*In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm*

Given the context in which these words are used, it is obvious that Doris Lessing will show in her first novel the juxtaposition between the romantic connotations of the title and the dreary



sense it is made to carry. Indeed the very choice of such a title gives an insight into the thematic implications of the novel which the present study seeks to unravel.

Post-colonialism-

Post-colonialism is a period of time after colonialism, and postcolonial literature is typically characterized by its opposition to the colonial. However, some critics have argued that any literature that expresses an opposition to colonialism, even if it is produced during a colonial period, may be defined as postcolonial, primarily due to its oppositional nature. Postcolonial literature often focuses on race relations and the effects of racism and usually indicts white and/or colonial societies. Despite a basic consensus on the general themes of postcolonial writing, however, there is ongoing debate regarding the meaning of post-colonialism. Many critics now propose that the term should be expanded to include the literatures of Canada, the United States, and Australia. In his essay discussing the nature and boundaries of post-colonialism, Simon During argues for a more inclusive definition, calling it “the need, in nations, or groups which have been victims of imperialism to achieve an identity uncontaminated by Universalist or Eurocentric concepts or images.” The scale and scope of modern European imperialism, as well as its extraordinarily organized character, including the cultural licensing of racial domination, has sometimes led to the perception of colonization as a modern phenomenon. In fact, many critics propose that modern colonialism was not a discrete occurrence and that an examination of premodern colonial activities will allow for a greater and more complex understanding of modern structures of power and domination, serving to illuminate the operation of older histories in the context of both modern colonialism and contemporary race and global political relations.

The novel and Post-Colonialism-

The Grass is Singing is a novel of colonialism, human degradation, and an uncomfortable view of the prevailing attitude of a time and place, and yet, to me it was more so a powerful portrait of a crumbling mind. Mary Turner is a hideous woman; bitter, cruel, entitled. What started out as a woman’s resentment over a boring farm life and a distant marriage soon turned into something deeper and much more unsettling. Sometimes people are broken so early in their life that it’s impossible to ever be whole, and at her core, Mary Turner was ruined long before adulthood and her neurosis was merely the lid on a simmering pot of rage and hurt. The book opens with her murder; we know she’s doomed. We watch as she flails and unravels and in the end, perhaps, finds some kind of distorted relief.

The plot of *The Grass Is Singing* is relatively simple. We are told at the beginning that Mary Turner, the wife of a farmer, has been killed by a house boy, that the murderer is caught, and that he admitted the crime. After extensively telling of the distress, even nervous breakdown, of the husband, Dick, Lessing stresses the responses of two others, Charlie Slatter, a



neighbor, and Tony Masrt on, an utopian twenty-year old and recent newcomer from England who had been working in Turner plantation for only a short time. Following this initial chapter, Lessing goes back to Mary Turner's childhood, and tells of a woman's gradual acceptance of an isolated, unmarried life, of her desperate acceptance of marriage at the age of thirty, of her subsequent adjustment to life on a desolate and unprofitable farm, her brutal treatment of natives, the complete mental and economic deterioration both she and her husband experience, the sale of the family business, and her final murder. At the heart of *The Grass Is Singing* is the whirlwind of race, the struggle that the female psyche of Mary Turner faces in accepting the blacks as human beings, not as equals, but merely as human.

To this end various unwritten laws of colonial Africa that are frequently mentioned in the novel serve as convenient support for an arrogant kind of exclusivism. So rigid were the laws regarding black-white contact that a black man could not even ride the same car as the corpse of a white man: one could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she was dead, and murdered by him. Thus the black becomes the constant, the invariable, the epitome of crime and violence, with the whites having behind them the police, the tribunals, the prisons, all the locals can strive is some more patience. Even the black police men are not permitted to touch a white man in the pursuit of their duties.

As a whole, the whites loathe the natives to the point of neurosis which ultimately causes the murder of the white lady, Mary. The whites are so certain about the necessity and rightness of their treatment of the blacks that newcomers to the country are immediately made aware of the difference between England and Rhodesia. Tony Marston at first thought only in such abstractions, holding "the conventionally, progressive" ideas about color, the superficial progressive of the idealist that seldom survives a conflict with self-interest. Hence he frequently started discussion with established white settler's on miscegenation, only to have his "progressiveness" deliciously flattered by this evidence of white ruling class hypocrisy. Following Mary's murder, he "Would do his best to forget the knowledge, for to live with colour bar in all its nuances and implications means closing one's mind to many things, if one intends to remain an accepted member of society".

Throughout her life Mary had been isolated, both in fact and in feeling, and this isolation had created in her a feeling of non-involvement in the lives and feelings of others that she calls "freedom". This "freedom", however, is not at all akin to the sense in which this term is used by the feminists and the female protagonists of Lessing's later fictions, for the "freedom" Mary Turner claims for herself is considerably less viable and carefully reasoned that it is for the feminists or Lessing's later central characters. Her real freedom, she believes, comes only after her parents' death, for then she is unhindered from her personal pursuit, although even then her innate fear of involvement can be seen; for although she is "free", she is not free at this time to enter into others' lives.



Traditionally, marriage is considered to be the final destiny for women. Mary, who is different from Martha in *Children of Violence Series*, does not experience much parental restriction, although she is almost forced into marriage by society. She had an unhappy and disturbing childhood because of her drunkard father who would constantly torture her mother. She spent the most part of her girlhood in a boarding school; free from any subservience, but then a turning point comes in her life when she overhears her intimate friends discussing her age and marriage. She is horrified to hear them commenting that there is “something missing somewhere” in her, just because she, not yet thirty, is still unwedded.

This little incident leaves a profound impact on Mary. She was thrown completely off her balance because some gossiping women had said she ought to get married. The tension in her life as a single woman begins here, and she is made to search hysterically for a husband, despite her intense aversion for marriage. She comes across a widower of fifty-five with half-grown children. His proposal is unthinkingly accepted by Mary, but once when that man tries to kiss her, she comes out from the house into the night and weeps bitterly. This incident becomes the talk of the town. At that crisis, she comes across Dick Turner, an ambitious farmer whom she meets by chance at the cinema and decides to marry, despite their different backgrounds, tastes and ambitions. The only common point between the two is that both of them are eager to marry.

The marriage, however, turns out to be a failure as Mary leaves her home and considers the life of a single woman and as a short of consequence she is not taken back in her office as she has lost most of her attractiveness. Roberta Rubenstein rightly observes that *The Grass is Singing* “concerns about social, economic and political structures, with being female in a conventional man’s world”. Dick follows Mary and takes her back to his home. However, Mary fails to return to her independent and tension-free past which she had enjoyed before marriage. Loneliness, suffering and frustration in marriage sometimes cause disintegration and make some women even schizophrenic as Mary in Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*.

The novel is a poignant portrayal of Mary’s disintegration and death because of her unhappy marriage. Mary, an independent, poised and amiable woman who disdains the very idea of marriage, is hastened into wedlock, after the malicious remarks made by her own friends who conform to the view that marriage is “the sole justification of her a woman’s existence”. In Mary’s case, it is not the enviousness, jealousy or cruelty of a man but mismatching which is responsible for the tragedy. After a hurried courtship, before they could understand and know the likes and dislikes of each other, Mary marries Dick who also needs her solely to fight his own loneliness. Loneliness is the only common point between the two, who have otherwise different pasts, different experiences and different backgrounds. While Mary “loved the town, felt safe there”, Dick detests the town-culture. Being a countryman, he loves spending most



of his time on his homestead. After marriage also, Dick remains busy in his farm work going in the morning, returning late in the evening and retiring to bed immediately after supper.

The sexual relationship of Mary and Dick is not very satisfactory from the beginning. While Dick purposely makes her a “sexual object by idealizing her, Mary can only accept him when he approaches her passively. Then falling back to him in a victim-like way expecting abuse and intrusion, she was comforted to find she felt nothing”. Thereby sex does not even draw them any closer, rather it divides them. Mary realizes that motherhood can give her some happiness and fulfillment, and at one stage she talks to Dick about having a child but Dick refuses on account of his poverty, which in fact is caused largely by his own failures and stubbornness. Now Mary tries to find meaning in her life by sewing, stitching and mending as if “fine embroidery would save her life”. The gulf between the two, however, keeps on widening and in their lonely home “they were stunned, unfulfilled figures”. Marriage closes doors for any career as well.

The woman who was once admired and loved by the society is disqualified because of her sloppy appearance and unpolished manners. She comes back and ultimately resigns herself to the traditional role of a woman. Lessing makes her *The Grass Is Singing* a study of the decay of a marriage between ill-matched couples who live on a poverty-stricken, incompetently managed farm on the Rhodesian veldt. The sexless ness of their marriage is a parallel to the impotence of Sir Clifford Chatterly, but it has its roots in poverty and deprivation rather than in industrialism and false liberalism. The black houseboy who becomes the Mello’s intruding on this relationship is ambiguously regarded by the white woman. He brings destruction instead of rebirth; it is not destruction of a cleansing Lawrentian kind, but the violent culmination of a long, demoralizing process. Yet the peculiar compulsion which the houseboy exerts over the white woman is intensely Lawrentian; and the scene in which the woman accidentally comes upon him when he is washing himself is clearly derived from Lady Chatter.

The breaking of the “formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant” by the “personal relation” against all the racial instincts of the women is also reminiscent of the way in which Mellor’s, simply by being what he is, breaks through the class barrier which Connie instinctively raises between them Lessing describes the book as being a “very driven book, I mean, there isn’t much, hope” in it.” She says further that there isn’t any advance from Moses to a native leader quoted in *The Golden Notebook*, Tom Math long “forgive me, but why should there be?” Similarly there is no real parallel between Mary Turner and Doris Lessing’s other female protagonists, all of whom do achieve a certain degree of “freedom” in their lives, and who explore meaningfully the various “commitments” open to them in the modern world. Mary Turner, by contrast, denies herself such commitments, thus making of her life a sterile, empty existence, symbolized not only by her childlessness but also by the wasteland in which she lives.



Doris Lessing's strength lies in the exploration of psychological conflicts within individuals in the book. For instance, merely knowing that Moses is the murderer says nothing about the forces at work in and on him that lead him to commit murder. Lessing's inexorable chronicling of the injustices and humiliations and dehumanized treatments received by the natives enables us to see the "why" behind the killing, just as her persistent probing into Mary Turner's thinking and reactions enables us to see the unthinking mentality of an entire way of life laid bare. Even though the whites who survive Mary see her death as an example to support their blind thinking about the blacks, to the reader the book takes on more of an allegorical or mythical quality, on a very limited scale, suggesting to us that such persistent refusal to accept the blacks as fully human only results in genocide.

That is why Lessing's portrayal of Mary Turner, may seem two-dimensional at times, demanding a closer examination because of the unique perspective Lessing brings to bear on the female psyche. Mary Turner is far less complicated than her protagonists in the *Children of Violence* series and *The Golden Notebook*, but Mary shares with them a persistent critical attitude and analysis, an obsessive concern about female sexuality, a self-conscious concern about freedom in an essentially masculine world, and a slight awareness, abortive though it may seem in comparison with the later novels, with the racial dichotomy existing in colonial Africa.

As a first novel, the book certainly contains examples of thinking and technique that a more experienced writer, such as Lessing herself in some recent years, would prefer to change, but it is regardless an appreciably unique first novel, particularly because it contains within itself the seeds of ideas explored more openly and fully in the series of novels about Martha Quest and *The Golden Notebook*.

Conclusion:

Mary Turner is not able to grasp her own identity because her identity is compounded by the overpowering colonial and gender narratives in which she is knit. The colonial ruling power dictates that she as an individual has to behave according to the terms imposed by her imperial identity. Even her disintegration must be silenced because it threatens the whole authority of the dominant category. Mary fails in her journey of self-quest but she is the heroine of this novel because she reverses the social, racial and cultural orders of her society though unconsciously. By her death, Mary paves the way for the native Africa/Moses to take a subjective action. She cannot guarantee her own identity since she does not have any antidote to loneliness, poverty and gender limitations, but she foreshadows a change in Imperial attitudes. *The Grass is Singing*, through its circular narration from a collective perspective of Mary's murder to an individual account of her personal life, completes an indictment of its central character's life in the centre of a closed white colonial society in



southern Africa in which the linked discourses of class, race, and gender bring her into exclusion, isolation, break down, and finally to death. Mary's failure of individuation is the failure of patriarchy and colonial culture to satisfy its female member to find fulfilment within this status quo.

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