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Full Length Research Paper

Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*: Anatomy of a female psyche in the midst of gender, race and class barrier

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One of the founder mothers of feminism, Doris Lessing 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 servant. The novel does not unswervingly explore the feminist causes. Still, Lessing's portrayal of Mary Turner warrants a closer examination because of the unique perspective Lessing brings to unfold the female psyche in the midst of gender, race and class barrier.

Key words: Gender, psyche, race, sexism.

INTRODUCTION

The Grass is Singing is a tale of subjection of a woman who was defeated and thwarted by the bullying of race, gender and other social discriminations. Mary Turner, the victim of such oppression, is unlike the other characters of Lessing, as she was never been given any freedom. Isolation, mental and economic sterility and emotional vacuity are all that dominated her whole life. After her marriage she suffered from laxity and meaninglessness of ill-matched marriage. She was forced by the society to accept loveless marriage that she also saw in her parent's life. As she grew up in a broken family, alienation and non-involvement subjugated her absolutely. Her life was tossed and turned by the wave of social insecurity, sexual dissatisfaction and vacuum. Her struggle in the turbulent wave was intensified when the clutches of race and patriarchy grab her. She was murdered by the black slave not because she was white, but she was the weaker sex.

British novelist and short-story writer Doris Lessing was born in Iran on 22 October, 1919. She lived on a farm in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) from 1924 to 1949 before settling in England and beginning her writing career. Her works, which have often reflected her leftist political activism, are largely concerned with people caught in social and political upheavals, and with the lives of women-their psychology, sexuality, politics, work, relationship to men and to their children, and their change of vision as they age. *Children of Violence* (Lessing, 1952), a semiautobiographical five-novel series featuring the character Martha Quest (Rosen, 1978), reflects her African experience and is among her most substantial works. *The Golden Notebook* (2007), her most widely read novel, is a feminist classic. Her masterful short stories are published in several collections. Other works include a science-fiction novel sequence, several novels published under the pseudonym Jane Somers, the volumes of autobiography *Under My Skin* (Lessing, 1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (Lessing, 1998), and collections of essays, including *Time Bites* (Lessing, 2005). Lessing won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007.

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 – 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 was the laws regarding black-white contact that the house Moses cannot ride in the same car as the corpse of May Turner: 'one could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she were dead, and murdered by him' (Lessing, 1950a). Thus the black becomes the constant, the invariable, the epitome of crime and violence; with the whites having behind them the police, the courts, the jails, all the natives can exert is 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' (Lessing, 1950a) which ultimately causes the murder of the white woman, Mary.

The plot of *The Grass is Singing* is relatively simple and uncomplicated. We are informed at the outset that Mary Turner, the wife of a farmer, has been killed by a house boy, that the murderer is caught, and that he confessed to the crime. After elaborately telling of the anguish, even emotional collapse, of the husband, Dick, Lessing emphasizes the reactions of two others, Charlie Slatter, a neighbor, and Tony Masrton, an idealistic twenty-year-old and recent immigrant from England who had been working in Turner farm for only a short time. Following this initial chapter, Lessing goes back to Mary Turner's childhood, and tells of a women's gradual acceptance of an isolated, unmarried life, of her desperate acceptance of marriage at the age of thirty, of her subsequent to 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 firm to Slatter (with Dick retained as manager and with Tony scheduled to step in as Charlie's representative when the Turners take a rest trip), and culminating with her murder.

The whites are so certain of 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 "the conventionally 'progressive' ideas about the color bar, the superficial progressive of the idealist that seldom survives a conflict with self-interest" (Lessing, 1950a). Hence he frequently started discussion with established white settlers on miscegenation, only to have his 'progressiveness' 'deliciously flattered by … evidence of white ruling class hypocrisy' (Lessing, 1950a). 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 (Lessing, 1950a:30).

Tony soon realizes that 'Moses would be hanged in any case', for 'he had committed a murder, that fact remained. Did he intend to go on fighting in the dark for the sake of a principle? And if so, which principle?' (Lessing, 1950a). It is thus no surprise that Marston is a broken man. Although we are not told what Marston's behavior henceforth is like, we can predict fairly safely, on the basis of Lessing's discussion on Africa on her return visit, what is likely to occur.

> Time and time again it was said to me, either jubilantly or with regret, "If you want to see the natives badly treated, then you should see the people just out from Britain: they are worse than anyone, much worse than the old Rhodesians." And "We thought that a big influx of immigrants from Britain would strengthen liberal opinion, but not a bit of it" (Lessing, 1950b:95).

Thus Marston's understanding of the situation is for him to see"

> "White civilization" fighting to defend itself … implicit in the attitude of Charlie Slatter and the Sergent, "white civilization" which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes and nothing can save it (Lessing, 1950a:30).

But Mary Turner, as a native Southeren Rhodesian, has none of this analytical perspective on the racial problem. Before she came to Dick Turner's farm, she had never had any direct contact with natives, but had developed a 'code' of behavior toward them just as the native had toward her. This 'code', consisting of 'politeness not to look a superior in the face' (Lessing, 1950a), Mary takes to be merely further indication of the natives' 'shifty and dishonest nature.' She of course had known previously that the natives were getting 'cheeky', but since this was at the time 'outside her orbit,' it meant nothing. Now though she is intent on teaching the natives about 'the dignity of work, which is a doctrine bred into the bones of every white South African' (Lessing, 1950a); she hates their physical vitality and suggestion of raw fertility and virility.

The subjection of the feminine self starts when Mary begins remaining in fear of Moses, the native house boy, from the outset of his stay in the house, and when gradually but inexorably Moses becomes Mary's master in ways she dare not admit consciously to herself. When she breaks down emotionally, she is self conscious at Moses' presence, and before long realizes that 'there was now a new relation between them.' This bizarre subjection was so prevailing that,

> She felt helplessly in his power. Yet there was no reason why she should. Never ceasing for one moment to be conscious of his presence about the house, or standing silently at the back against the wall in the sun, her feeling was one of a strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even-though this she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledge – of some dark attraction. It was as though the act of weeping before him had been an act of resignation of her authority; and he had refused to hand it back. Several times the quick rebukes

> had come to her lips, and she had seen him look at her deliberately, not accepting it, but challenging her. Only once, when he had really forgotten to do something and was in the wrong, had he worn his old attitude of black submissiveness. Then he accepted, because he was at fault. And now she begins to avoid him. And she was held in balance, not knowing what this new tension was that she could not break down (Lessing, 1950a:190-191).

Moses, a representative of the blacks as well as patriarchal society, creates a horror in the feminine psyche and starts calling Mary 'madame' instead of the usual 'missus, but 'almost he was never disrespectful, he forced her, now to treat her a human being' (Lessing, 1950a). He even dares to touch her.

> He put out his hand reluctantly, loathe to touch her, the sacrosanct white woman, and pushed her by shoulder; she felt her gently propelled across the room towards the bedroom. It was like a nightmare where one is powerless against horror: the touch of this black man's hand on her shoulder filled her with nausea; she had never, not once in her whole life, touched the flesh of a native (Lessing, 1950a:86).

There is afterward a 'new relationship between them'; the power this new relationship reflects becomes increasingly malevolent, and repeatedly in the final pages of the novel, Moses' very presence in the house leads Charlie, Dick, and especially Tony to express fear of Moses' arrogant behavior and the possibility of violence occurring. Moses knows that Tony is the only white with whom he must contend, for he knows Dick had been defeated long before. Rather than to escape, though, Moses ponders the house and Mary's body after the murder:

> And this was his final moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent. … Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his compounded with satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say (Lessing, 1950a:255-56).

Thus Moses achieves his revenge. He considers Mary as a representative of the whites. But ironically while protesting the White or colonial subjection, he has subjected somebody from the opposite sex. He dares to target a masculine partner and Mary becomes the victim. He chooses Mary not only because she is white, but also she is female, supposedly the weaker sex. While doing so, Moses allows the white in power to show him as a practical example that the blacks are not fit to be treated as human, since the "black man … will thieve, rape, murder, if given a half chance" (Lessing, 1950a).

The same subjection Mary receives from her husband, Dick. Their relationship was a failure. She sometimes cannot tolerate him realizing that Dick expects much from her:

> 'You expect a lot from me, don't you?' On the brink of disaster, she pulled herself up, but could not stop completely, and after a hesitation went on, 'You expect such a lot! You expect me to live like a pokey little place of yours (Lessing, 1950a:95).

Sometimes with a vague attempt to establish her feminine identity, she protests like a true feminist. Failing to endure Dick, she speaks,

> in a new voice for her, a voice she had never used before her life. … It was not the voice of Mary, the individual … but the voice of the suffering female, who wanted to show her husband she just would not be treated like that (Lessing, 1950a:96).

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, in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing,* is almost forced into marriage by society. Mary, who is different from Martha in *Children of Violence Series*, does not experience much parental restriction. Mary 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" (Lessing, 1950a) in her, just because she, not thirty, is still unmarried. 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 (Lessing, 1950a). The tension in her life as a single woman begins here, and she is made to search frantically for a husband, despite her ardent dislike 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 casually-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. Once Mary runs out from his home and thinks of resuming her life as a single woman, but in her old office she is not taken back because now she has lost the graces and attractiveness which are a professional requirement. Rubenstein rightly observes that *The Grass is Singing* "concerns social, economic and political structures, with female in a conventional man's world" (Rubenstein, 1979). 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.

Even after her marriage, she still attempts to emulate the vague feminism she inherited from her mother.

> The woman who marries Dick learns sooner or later that there are two things they can do: they can drive themselves mad, tear themselves into pieces in storms of futile anger and rebellion; or they can hold themselves tight and go bitter. Mary with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable (Lessing, 1950a:110).

The irony of Mary's situation, as the preceding quotation suggests, is that she begins her exile on the firm completely embittered, only in the last years before her death rebelling against both her husband and her class and race, and finally being torn apart herself as a consequence of her unwise behavior.

Mary's unwillingness to enter fully into the realm of the personal is clear in her attitude toward and reaction against sexuality. Although sentimental at weddings, she throughout her life feels a "profound distaste for sex. … there had been little privacy in her home and there were things that she did not care to remember; she had taken good care to forget them years ago" (Lessing, 1950a). When she does marry Dick, she feels, following her deflowering on the wedding night, that,

> It was not so bad, … when it was all over: not as bad as that. It meant nothing to her, nothing at all. Expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing. She was able maternally to bestow the gift of herself on this humble stranger, and remain untouched. Women have an extraordinary ability to withdraw from sexual relationship, to immunize themselves against it, in such a way that their men can be left feeling let down and insulted without having anything tangible to complain of. Mary did not have to learn this, because it was natural to her, and because she had expected nothing in the first place (Lessing, 1950a:66-67).

Although, Mary finds the idea of normal sexual relations with Dick repulsive, both her subconscious, expressed through dreams and her psychotic state towards the end of her life demonstrate the extent to which an abnormal or unusual sexual manifestation is desired.

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" (de Beauvoir, 1952). In Mary's case, it is not the possessiveness, jealousy or cruelty of a man but mismatching which is responsible for 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" (Lessing, 1950a), Dick dislikes the town-culture. Being a farmer, he loves spending most of his time on his farm. 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 unintentionally makes her a "sexual object by idealizing her, Mary can only accept him when he approaches her submissively. Then yielding to him in a martyr-like way expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing" (Rubenstein, 1979). Thus even sex does not bring them any closer; it rather separates 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 marry tries to find the meaning in life by sewing, stitching and mending as if "fine embroidery would save her life" (Lessing, 1950a).

The gulf between the two, however, keeps on widening and in their lonely home "they were stunned, unfulfilled figures" (Charles and Liebetraut, 1978).

Marriage closes doors for her and 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, that is, of looking after her home and husband.

Lessing makes her *The Grass is Singing* a study of the decay of a marriage between an ill-matched couple who live on a poverty-stricken, incompetently managed farm on the Rhodesian veldt. The sexlessness 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 Mellors 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 Chatterly. 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 Mellors, simply by being what he is, breaks through the class barrier which Connie instinctively raises between them (Draper and Lawrence, 1964).

Lessing describes the book as being a "very driven book, I mean, there isn't much 'hope' in it." She adds that there isn't any progress from Moses to a native leader mentioned in *The Golden Notebook*, Tom Mathlong: "forgive me, but why should there be?" (Lessing, 1964a, b). Similarly there is no real parallel between Mary Turner and 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.

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 as we see in the novel only results in genocide.

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 self examination and analysis, an obsessive concern about female sexuality, 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 more recent years, would prefer to alter, but it is nonetheless a relatively distinguished 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 (Rosen, 1978) and in *The Golden Notebook*.

Conclusion

The discrimination of gender and race is the main force behind the predicament of sterility and alienation in Mary Turner's life. Unsuccessful marriage resulted in absolute disintegration in her life. The huge gulf that was created in their conjugal life ultimately compelled her to think to be separated from her husband. Lessing going deep into the human psyche depicts that this enormous gulf between individual understandings can never be compensated. This dark abyss is again manifested in racial discrimination through the relationship between Mary and her black slave Moses who is portrayed in this novel as the representative of patriarchal society. Moses, the black slave, killed Mary to take vengeance on the White as well as the opposite sex. Thus Mary is the only victim of the menace of the patriarchal society. Lessing exquisitely shows how the protagonist of the novel suffered and was killed swindling in the whirlwind of gender and race.

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