



INVESTIGATION OF WHITE COLONIAL IDENTITY IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING*

Dr. S. GEETHA

Assistant Professor of English, Sri K.G.S. Arts College, Srivaikundam,
Thoothukudi District, Tamil Nadu.



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 deals with racial politics between whites and blacks. 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.

The most creative of contemporary British writers and the recipient of more than twenty literary prizes and awards, Doris May Tayler was born in Kermanshah, Persia and grew up in Southern Rhodesia until 1949. She came to England with the youngest of her three children and with the manuscript of her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*. The novel was published in 1950, and gained its author immediate success. Since then she has never stopped writing, producing a huge number of novels, short stories, personal narratives, plays, and poems investigating on extraordinary variety of themes. The years spent in Africa influenced Lessing deeply as a writer.

Ruth Whittaker, one of the readers of Lessing's works, in his work *Doris Lessing* commented this novel as, "an extraordinary first novel in its assured treatment of its unusual subject matter... Doris Lessing questions the entire values of Rhodesian white colonial society" (88).

The Grass Is Singing narrates the life events of Mary Turner shaped by colonial experience, in the Rhodesian veld and South Africa, and questions the entire values of the Rhodesian white colonial society. Lessing spins an intricate text, interweaving Mary's life and struggle in a colonial world. In vibrant details, Lessing describes the effects of a society under colonization – a culture polluted by the rigid infrastructure of patriarchy – giving rise to gender and race discriminations. The author traces Mary's psychological growth during the numerous phases of her life – from an indigent, unhappy childhood to her unnatural death at the hand of her native houseboy and in the process politically exposes the futility and feebleness of a patriarchal colonial system. Lessing accurately portrays the chaos caused in a society under imperialism - hierarchy, racism and oppression.

Lessing begins the novel with the murder of Mary Turner. Sketching the reactions of the British members of the society living in the district, Lessing offers an in-depth view of the defective society Mary belonged to. Lessing, who is well known for her active support and participation in women's movements, instilled in the novel, a harsh criticism of the patriarchal colonial system, which immobilized women, denying them an agency – their right to economic independence and a construction of their own identity. Through the character of Mary Turner, the protagonist, Lessing depicts the conservative society of Rhodesia – the elements of racial and gender prejudices that tapered the spirit of Mary, suffocating her and leading her to her death.



Mary's early childhood is shaped under the influence of an oppressive father who wastes his money on drink while his family is living in depression and poverty. Her mother who is her first model of gender role: a passive and helpless woman, dominated by the crushing masculine patterns, nonetheless the complying victim of poverty (33). Besides sharing the pains of poverty and living in "a little house that was like a small wooden box on slits" (36) and the quarrel of her parents over money, Mary has been the witness of their sexuality and her mother's body in the hands of a man who was simply not present for her (36). All her life, Mary tries to forget these memories but in fact she has just suppressed them with the fear of sexuality which comes up later nightmarishly in her dreams. By seeing her mother as a feminine victim of a miserable marriage, she internalizes a negative image of femininity in the form of sexual repression, inheriting her mother's baked feminism.

In order to escape from this tragic repetition and after her mother's death, Mary finds a job as a secretary in the town at sixteen and begins a lonely life. By dropping her father, she seems "in some way to be avenging her mother's sufferings" and to cut herself from her past (35). Her last relief comes after her father's death that nothing remains to connect her with the past. Trying to forget her distressing memories, she remains a girl, choosing to live in a girls' club, wearing her hair in a little-girl fashion. She does not consider her shyness, immaturity and aloofness as weakness; as a matter of fact, she is unconscious of them. But then a turning point comes in her life when she overhears her intimate friends discussing her age and marriage. She is shocked to hear them commenting that there is "something missing somewhere" (42) in her, just because she, not yet thirty, is still unwedded.

To be thirty and single in a white colonial society is almost a form of deviation. Her personal status becomes a reason for anxiety, reinforced by her awareness that her peculiarities are subject to public scrutiny. In extreme anxiety, she marries the first man capable to offer her an acceptable way out – Dick Turner. Dick's motivation is equally inadequate. Lacking self-knowledge, he craves for marriage in its lovingly idealized form, as a way of fulfilling a set of socially created expectations. Though identical in their emotional flatness, Dick and Mary Turner only have their needs in common, while, emotionally, they are worlds apart.

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" (50), 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 also is not very satisfactory. Even sex does not bring them any closer; it rather separates them. The narrator depicts this failure through Mary's sexual identity and the clearly inadequate sexual relationship between her and Dick:

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 the sexual relationship, to immune 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. (55)

Mary's marriage not only proves her helplessness to transcend her gendered bias, but also her inability to escape from her class. She feels weak and disappointed as if "her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead" (54). She sees the meagerness and narrowness of her family's life follow her in her marriage. Poverty from which Mary has always tried to escape tracks her in her ill-matched marriage.



Roberta Rubenstein in his work *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness*, rightly observes that the novel *The Grass is Singing* "concerns about social, economic and political structures, with being female in a conventional man's world" (17). Mary's marriage condition is:

The women who marry Dick learn 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. (110)

The gulf between the two, however, keeps on widening. Mary, used to the city, does not feel at home on Dick's rustic farm. She meets the black house servant, Samson. She hates Dick for his generosity to Samson, which she feels in unwarranted. She takes control of the household, becoming so stingy with Samson that he finally offers his resignation. Tensions rise between Mary and Dick, as he grows frustrated with her waste of precious water and lack of interest in sex. She meets but dislikes Charlie Slatter and his wife, finding them patronizing. The Turners cycle through one black house servant after another, as Mary's iron fist drives them away.

Dick engages in an ill-fated project to run a bee farm, and Mary begins to suspect that he is not nearly as good of a farmer as he lets on. He then decides to open a kaffir store, a shop for native black Rhodesians. Mary is disgusted by her customers and the store does poorly. Dick has more failed business projects trying to raise pigs, turkeys, then rabbits. She learns that Charlie Slatter plans to buy Dick's farm when he unavoidably goes bankrupt, and runs off to the city to try to get her old job back. But after her old boss rejects her and she's unable to pay her hotel bill, Mary realizes her old life is gone forever. She returns home. Soon after, Dick was affected by malaria. Mary is forced to nurse him and supervise the native workers, whom she fears and despises. But as the weeks pass, Mary finds she likes being in charge, but the workers grow aggrieved of her demands. This conflict comes to a head when one, a man named Moses, refuses to continue working and Mary strikes him. She fears he'll hit her back, but he goes back to work. After Dick recovers, Mary presents him with her opinions of how to most efficiently run the farm. He feels respect for Mary, but also shame, and above all, grief and anger that her plans for tobacco farming ultimately end in them moving to the city.

Mary leaves Dick to his farming, but a drought ruins their first tobacco crop. Mary becomes disheartened, especially after Dick tells her they can't have the finances to have a child. After Dick invites Mary to view the farming with him, she realizes they will never succeed due to his incompetence. She sees Moses, the worker she struck in the face, and is torn between guilt over her actions, deception at his muscular body, and dislike over his race. She is particularly critical of Moses, but he accepts her harsh word without complaint. But eventually, Moses announces he will leave at the end of the month. She begs him to stay, and he reluctantly agrees. She begins dreaming of Moses' body. She begins to avoid Moses, terrified by her own subconscious thoughts.

Gossip begins to go around the local community about Mary and Dick, that both have begun to lose their marbles. Charlie Slatter, who has not seen the couple in two years, pays a visit. Mary is thin and dressed inappropriately, like a young girl. Slatter tells Dick to take Mary on a vacation and sell his farm, promising he can stay on as land manager. Dick agrees, though his pain is evident. Slatter hires Martson to run the farm in Dick's absence. Marston is shocked by Mary's mental state, Dick's physical weakening, and the decaying farm. He sees Moses helping Mary with her dress, an intimate act considered taboo in a place like Rhodesia. Marston orders Moses to leave, which sends Mary into a fit. The Turners are to leave for vacation the day after next.

Mary awakes the next day and goes about her farm duties in a kind of daydream, feeling that Moses is somewhere on the farm, waiting. She imagines the grass is singing, that the farm will be consumed by the trees and animals when she leaves. She wanders the farm, eventually encountering Marston, whom she



imagines to be Dick. She tells him she's ill in her heart, and always has been. She returns to the house. Dick tells her to pack for the trip, but Mary has a sense of her awaiting death. She goes to bed alone, but is awakened by thunder outside, and a sense that Moses is near. She goes onto the veranda and sees Moses approaching. She wonders if she'll be able to explain herself, but Moses stabs her to death before she can say a word. She dies, her last thought being that "the bush has avenged itself." Moses cleans his weapon. He decides that he will not pretend to be innocent when the body is found. With the ultimate victory must come the ultimate result.

The novel shed light on how the patriarchal familial structure was adopted by colonization and politicized race, culture and gender to achieve their desired effects. By downgrading the race, culture and women, the colonizers effectively refused them an agency- a voice through which they could express their identities and a sense of self an operation that deemed them weak and easy prey to subjugation. The discrimination of gender and race is the main force behind the predicament of alienation in Mary Turner's life. Unsuccessful marriage resulted in complete 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 portrays that this enormous gulf between individual understandings can never be compensated. This dark gulf 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 revenge on the White as well as the opposite sex.

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. She greatly attempts to find a sense of self- an identity without the influence of the colonial culture. Mary breaks through the barriers of patriarchal and colonial culture through inevitable death which sets her free from all terms and conditions that existed in her society. Thus Mary is the only victim of the threat of the patriarchal society. Lessing gracefully shows how the protagonist of the novel suffered and was killed dishonest in the whirlwind of gender and race.

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