

# Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*: An Analysis from Feminist Point of View

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## Abstract

Doris Lessing is a prolific writer whose literary career covers over a period of sixty years. Her works are well known for their multi-dimensional characteristics. As a writer Doris Lessing was never guided by literary fashion. When we examine her works it is difficult to pin Lessing to any particular genre or subject. Actually, she is a writer of versatile genius. In her writing Lessing often touches on racial issues concerning the black community, although these are usually not the main themes of her fiction. Lessing is actually concerned with issues regarding human psyche, racial integration and, last but not the least, the integration of women in social groups. *The Grass is Singing* is about the experiences of Doris Lessing when she was in Africa. The themes of the novel are 'embryonic versions' of her later works. The murder of a white woman by her black man servant, Mary Turner as plot of the novel was inspired by a woman Lessing met in Salisbury. In the present paper an attempt is made to analyse Lessing's debut novel *The Grass is Singing* from feminist point of view.

**Key Words:** Blacks, Black- White Relationship, Colonialism, Gender roles, Racial Discrimination, Sexism.

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*Grass is Singing* is about the experiences of Doris Lessing when she was in Africa. The themes of the novel are 'embryonic versions' of her later works. The murder of a white woman by her black man servant, Mary Turner as plot of the novel was inspired by a woman Lessing met in Salisbury. The woman who had never been to the countryside tried to cover every part of her body to protect it from insects. This led the writer to speculate what if such a woman 'who rarely left the town' would do if she had to live as a farmer's wife (like Lessing's mother). (Klein 119) Her not socializing with other white neighbours and not managing her servants makes her situation worse as it was 'completely forbidden.' (Klein 119)

Her society was a repressed society due to colour bar. Like the writer Mary escapes the farm life and finds a small job in a small town. The routine life of Mary is not disturbed by her parents' death. Leaving behind her 'pinched childhood' she fights against odds to have a peaceful life. Her friends who had married 'to have homes of their own and no one telling them what to do' persuade her secretly, silently' to marry. (GS 52) Mary's not marrying and her looking younger than her age is discussed by her friends who instead of admiring her 'youthful approach to life considers her as odd: Why does she dress so girlishly? Why she is still not married at her age? Why isn't she interested in men?' (Klein 119) Such questions that come to the mind of her friends make Mary think of herself as 'a silly, ageing old maid.

(Klein 119) With a casual approach she enters the married life. Even after her marriage she does not think of Dick as a man she had married and had 'claims on her' though feeling protective for him. (GS 54) Dick tells her about how he made the house not knowing anything about how to build a house. How he was given 'a table' and 'a chair' by the neighbours. Mary's marriage means for her running the inadequate house of her husband in the farm which is depressing for her. She was 'forbidden to talk to' the servants in her mother's house. As an employer also Mary is afraid of her servants as every woman 'in South Africa is Brought up to be'. Dick employs Moses for the household jobs. Mary's mismanaging the servants make the struggle to succeed as a farmer more difficult.

Mary seeks refuge in a private world of dream and fantasy. With her energy and determination she on the natives for house work was so smooth that she had never paid any attention to how it devoted herself to sewing, stitching and embroidering. She also painted the house which dazzled due to her effort. Dick 'admired her capability' and was also 'alarmed'. This is what he lacked 'efficiency' (GS 65) Dick's patience and affection for Mary who fails to understand the native's ways to communicate is parental. Servants who had worked with him for years leave him due to Mary's mishandling of them. His philosophical acceptance of the situation and his genuine grief at the end of such association is not understood by Mary. Her dependence worked: "All her life natives had done the work for her, as silently and as unobtrusively as fairies. (GS 69) She watches the water cart driven by oxen bring water from well at the bottom of the hill. But she fails to appreciate the tension of her husband who is horrified to find her using water lavishly. (GS 75) Mary thinks of herself as a wife 'suffering' the hardships 'uncomplainingly' and that bath in her place 'was like medicine' not a luxury sympathises herself who is not allowed to 'use a couple of gallons of water'.

Mary employs her servants without ever thinking of them 'as people who had to eat or sleep'. (GS 79) Her neighbours' friendly gestures are not reciprocated by Mary. Mrs. Slatter is offended by the note sent by Mary refusing the invitation to an evening party. They think that Mary has got 'ideas into her head' and dismiss both the husband and wife as dreamers and not practical. Dick as a good farmer did not misuse the dark earth to make money. He planted trees to protect it which did not bring him money. He worked hard to make things better and to plan for children. (GS 87-88)

Mary's handling of the natives whom she considers as 'filthy savages' (GS 123) and forcing them work reluctantly result in their resentment for her supervision which she has to do due to the illness of Dick. But making 'eighty black workers' do what she wanted 'give her new confidence'. (GS 123-125) She learnt to control them without weakness. The laughter of the Africans when one of them tried to explain to Mary that he needs water angered her. Her rage at his speaking English which was considered as "cheek" by the whites in Africa is defied by the insolvent man. Her having 'the police, the courts, the jails behind her' did not affect his patience. Mary's attitude to the farm had nothing to do with love. Dick knew every tree of his farm and his love for his farm was not the 'sentimental love of the townsman'. (GS 141)

The difference and the calmness of Moses, the male servant, her hatred of the nigger and the complaint of her husband against her bad management and structured the pattern of the black and white, mistress and servant relationship in the house. Her shaking with sobs in front of a native was horrifying to her. Her request to stop the servant from going reflects her weakening position in the relationship. His helping her to bed is not the service rendered by a servant it was 'gentle' and 'almost fatherly'. (GS 172)

Her dreaming of the native and waking up in terror as he touched her can be analysed with reference to her ideas regarding sex, marriage and colour bar. The use of dreams and the fusion of dream with reality for example when Mary is reported about Dick sleeping next door by the native she thinks of her dream about the death of her husband was a conventional technique

This debut novel of Doris Lessing is one of the important literary works of twentieth century which highlights the dynamics of Black-White relationship against the colonial background of Rhodesia where she spent her young age. The depiction of the social practices of colour bar by the white society in this colony of Britain is the theme of the novel. Conventional characters such as Charles Slatter are drawn to represent the exploitative, colonial 'white civilization' in the novel. His philosophy "to get a whip before the plough" is based on the slave driving principle of the white in Colonial Africa. His belief in framing with the sjambok is a typical image of the exploitative practices of the whites.

Mary's attitude towards the blacks is typical of a white woman who is both repulsed and attracted beyond her control. Her rule by the sjambok brings her into a confrontation with Moses who defies her even when he is lashed. He does not accept defeat nor retaliate but there is something in his gaze that makes Mary apprehensive. Mary's apprehension brings the tension in the novel where the reader can sense an imminent violent irruption, a refreshing towards catastrophe.

Mary's confrontation with Moses her man servant is depicted by the narrator with a detailed account of the complexity of the relationship. The aggressive white woman lacking the skill of handling a native merely because of the lack of association with them is dramatized to the full extent. Mary's whipping across his face for the slightest of delay is repulsed by the equanimity on his face. Moses first becomes a part of the Turner family only because of the absence of a servant but Mary is drawn towards him feeling the physical attraction of his shining muscular body overpowering. Her repulsion of the black natives defines this strange love-hate relationship and does not stop her from allowing him to become the master of her "self". She sympathises Moses as well as exploits him.

The murder of a white woman by her black servant can be seen as a protest of the black against the white. The novel begins with the murder and ends with the revelation of the intention behind it. Through this common act of human defiance Doris Lessing is highlighting the dynamics of coloniser-colonised, exploiter-exploited, victimizer-victimised relationship in a racial society.

As it depicts a strong aggressive desire on the part of the colonizer to maintain their position so also there is a strong tendency on the part of the male character to sustain their domination over the female. The feminist movement is concerned with equality between male and female to end women's suffering in the patriarchal society. Through the depiction of the relationship between Mary and Dick and between Mary and Moses the novel unfolds Lessing's anxiety about social, economic and political structures, the problem of women existing in a male-dominated world.

Mary's belief regarding women's suffering caused by males is not supported by her life. Mary sees her mother's suffering as a woman by the male power which is represented by her father. The narrator indicates her innocence regarding the complex issues of race and feminism in the beginning of the novel:

It had never occurred to her that her father, ...She understood nothing of conditions in other countries, had no measuring rod to assess herself with (GS 32).

The society depicted in the novel is shown as governed by the male authority which affects the females' opinions about Mary's marriage. Her female relatives and friends acted like males by criticizing her for being a single woman. The contradictory approach of Mary to men is mentioned:

She seemed not to care for men. ... though she would have most indignantly repudiated the accusation (GS-38)

The traditional concepts of gender roles are examined in the novel. Dick's assumptions of marriage are as follows: "He knew perfectly well what he wanted: a pleasant companion, a mother his children and someone to run his house for him" (GS 40). Mary, at the beginning of her marriage, wants to run the house the way she wants. Dick's feelings of weakness and guilt of getting married makes him surrender to her by avoiding their arguments because he sees he has no right to do so. This is an example of how the victim becomes the oppressor if he/she has the chance.

Mary's concept of marriage is guided by the concept of her friends. It meant becoming the mistress of their own world with 'no one to tell them what to do.' Dick's controlling of Mary's activities such as the amount of water she uses is an example of the presentation of male as authority allowing no choice to women even in small matters. Her reaction toward his control over her usage of money and objects inside the house cannot be treated as an example of women's sense of subjugation suffering around the world. The scene of conflict between the husband and wife is described by the detached narrator, who chooses not to focus on the subject of the conflict but the voice of the character supposing herself as a victim.

The ironical use of the image of the 'martyred rage' of the suffering female to describe the cry of a wife used by her to end the debate in her favour is an instance of the subtle observation of life.

The narrative details do not reflect the feminist banner raised against the repressive ways of the patriarchal society forcing females to become submissive. It appears that Dick and Mary victimise each other ignoring each other's need for having a child. At the beginning of her marriage, Mary tells Dick that she does not want a child because she is not happy in her marriage. He obeys her because of his feelings of guilt of his inability to fulfil her needs. Later, Mary asks Dick if they can have a child but he refuses it and pays no attention to her need to have a child.

They both impose their opinions on each other; therefore, sometimes Mary is the victim and in other cases she is the oppressor. Mary sees that her right is to determine when they can have a child and Dick also believes that this is his own right. Moses' revenge of Mary shows how an oppressed man can turn into a monster especially if he is the victim of a woman. Moses decides to take revenge upon Mary because she humiliates him and takes his male pride away by controlling his life. On the other hand, Mary stands helpless in front of Moses waiting for her death. As a woman, she knows what it means to control man's life and how this control will have its impact upon her own life and destiny. Her fear of Moses is noticeable; rather she waits her tragic death all the night long. When he comes to kill her, she stands helpless in front of his power and rage. She is so terrified that she even cannot shout

for help. Mary believing herself to be a figure of female suffering, becomes the oppressor when she becomes the boss of the farm during Dick's sickness. According to Greene:

From the start, Lessing's feminism was linked to an understanding of racism gained from her years in Africa and to an understanding of class related to Marxism (25).

This critical opinion clarifies how Lessing in her work links issues related to people's suffering, such as sexism with racial discrimination. Moreover, Mary loves the taste of power she feels when she has been controlling the servants in the farm. She treats them harshly and she does not allow them to have rest and if anyone stops working she offends him. In order to manifest her power, she whips a servant for taking a rest for more than one minute. The servants' responses to Mary's orders where they 'protest' her commands make it crystal clear. Mary admits that she has acquired her leadership ability from her father through observing him treat his servants. This shows that it is the norms for man to hold the leading position while it is not so for women to do that. The narrator states Mary's inheritance of aspects of leadership from her father:

The phrases of this little lecture came naturally to her lips: ... when he was lecturing his native servants that they welled up from the part of her brain that held her earliest memories (GS-128).

Mary and Dick always confront each other in any subject they discuss about their life. Dick wants to plant mealies, while Mary wants to plant tobacco because they can gain more money. Although her idea could have brought to them more money, he opposes her and starts making fun of her. The reason is that he believes she knows nothing about farming. Moreover, though Mary talks in soft voice but Dick gets angry and talks in a harsh voice: "And then his eyes reddened, and his face set, and the two deep lines scored from cheekbones to chin deepened". (GS-156)

In addition, because Dick is more powerful than Mary, he accuses and blames her for losing the servants in the farm because of cruel treatment towards them. He says that the workers will not come back and other workers will not work in the farm because Dick gains a bad reputation because of the bad treatment the natives have faced. Bloom says:

In their foregrounding of female physical ugliness, perpetuate values of gender inequality and the necessary punishment of women" (141).

Dick sometimes transforms from a peaceful man into one who forces Mary to do things she does not like. For example, he forces her to keep the servant although his presence has a great impact upon her life and finally leads to her death at the hands of this servant. His assumptions that women do not know how to deal with the natives are typical male assumptions. Charlie, the owner of the farm in Rhodesia, believes that women cannot deal with natives. As he puts it "No woman knows how to handle niggers" (GS -200)

Like the white in Mary's society the readers of this novel may also feel that Mary deserved her death due to her naivety in the treatment of the natives. This idea is also clarified through people's reactions toward the newspaper's extract about her death. Lessing's treatment of femininity presents her concept of life whether it is balanced or imbalanced, happy or unhappy, deep or shallow. All these against the colonial backdrop of Rhodesia present an interesting and complex study:

Now she dreamed through her broken nights, horrible, frightening dreams... but forcing her into a position where she had to touch him (GS-178)

Her dreams are based on her fear of the natives and on the concepts of marriage and sex. It is only in dreams where Mary can fully unite the past with the present, which reflects the suppressed feelings of Mary. This analysis is relevant to Mary's dreams because they reflect her real life. In the dream, she plays with her siblings, sees her father 'beer smelling and jocular' then her father comes and holds her mother in his arms so that Mary runs away. This shows the essence of her fear of getting involved in an intimate relation with Dick.

To conclude it goes without saying that in her first novel which is considered as a conventional novel Doris Lessing's use of sarcasm makes it belong to the tradition of social realism. The novel presents the theme of colour bar as well as of feminism as intertwined in this fascinating novel.

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