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A STUDY OF DORIS LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING*

Abstract

The Grass is Singing is the novel written by Doris Lessing which was a successful debut novel, published in 1950. The novel presents the vivid account of the social life of the people living there and deals with the racial politics between the whites and the blacks in that country. The novel is indeed a brilliant exploration of the oppressed and the oppressor evoking an incredible sense of place. This paper is an attempt to understand how the novel relates to the story of a white couple but narrates the social life of both the communities, the white settlers and the black African native with the deep-rooted prejudices and bias against each other. Also, this study attempts to understand how the novel *The Grass is Singing* is a bleak and terrifying analysis of a failed marriage, the febrile neurosis of white sexuality, and the fear of black power and energy that Lessing saw as underlying the white colonial experience of Africa.

Keywords: Natives, Colonialism, African, oppressors, Moses, Rhodesia

Doris May Lessing was a British poet, novelist, librettist, playwright, short story writer and a biographer. Her famous novels are *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *The Grass is Singing* (1950), *The Good Terrorist* (1985), the sequence of five novels together called *Children of Violence* (1952–69), and five novels well known as *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979–83). Doris Lessing was the oldest person ever to receive the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Doris Lessing's hugely successful novel, *The Grass is Singing*, has been hailed as actually some kind of a mini masterpiece and a brilliant exploration of the oppressed and the oppressor. Evoking an incredible sense of place, it takes place in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), in Southern Africa. The title of this novel is lifted from a line in T.S. Eliot's *The*

Waste Land from the section 'What the Thunder Said'. It is one of the more jubilant and reviving images used in this section with destruction's power over growth. Written in a relentless but devastatingly powerful prose, the novel's treatment of the tragic decline of Mary and Dick Turner's fortunes becomes a metaphor for the whole white presence in Africa. According to Ruth Whittaker, one of the readers of Doris Lessing's works, this work of fiction is "an extraordinary first novel in its assured treatment of its unusual subject matter... Doris Lessing questions the entire values of Rhodesian white colonial society." (1988:28). The novel is peppered with passages of startling and shocking honesty about the fault lines in the white psyche. It was filmed in Zambia in 1981 by a Swedish company. Eva Hunter put forward that *The Grass is Singing* "suggests that within the white community which sees itself as a vanguard of civilization, the pressure on women to fulfill the role of moral guardians is particularly heavy" (1989:141).

British settlers arrived in the land, which was to become Rhodesia in the late 1890's; the Africans resisted them but by 1898 the British had won. In 1911, the British divided the country into Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia. Southern Rhodesia became a self-governing British Colony in 1923. Northern Rhodesia became independent as Zambia in 1963. However, the white dominated government in Southern Rhodesia was opposed to majority rule by coloured Africans, "the natives". In 1965, despite British opposition, this government declared its independence. Many countries imposed economic sanctions and these, together with internal guerrilla activity, forced the Rhodesian government to negotiate with the main black African groups. Finally, in 1980, a majority government of black Africans was formed and in that same year, Britain recognized the independence of Southern Rhodesia, now called Zimbabwe.

The novel begins with the death of Mary Turner, the white wife of a white Rhodesian farmer in colonial South Africa. A newspaper reports how the houseboy, Moses who confessed at the scene, has been arrested. From there Lessing takes the reader back in time, revealing the community of which Dick and Mary were an isolated part, detailing how they met and married, and gradually, unveiling the events that led to the tragedy. What exactly happens in that stifling tin-roofed house is never fully revealed. One suspects that in the end Mary willed her own murder, as preferable to the holiday with Dick, inevitably followed by a return to grinding poverty and loneliness of their lives. Mary refers to her dear mom, a female who suffered lots out of her drunken father's aspect. In assessment, she confesses that she hadn't witnessed the sort of patriarchal and oppression feeling towards ladies in

the established surroundings of Rhodesia and earlier than her marriage to Dick, she used to live liberally without any restrict:

It had never occurred to her that her father, too, might have suffered. "About what?" she have retorted, had anyone suggested it. "He's a man, isn't he? He can do as he likes." She had inherited from her mother an arid feminism, which had no meaning in her own life at all, for she was leading the comfortable carefree existence of a single woman in South Africa, and she did not know how fortunate she was. How could she know? She understood nothing of conditions in other countries, had no measuring rod to assess herself with (Lessing, 1980:32).

On one level, this is a story of a woman who goes mad within marriage, but Lessing makes sure we have trouble feeling any sympathy for Mary. Even though Mary Turner has led a somewhat limited life in her sleepy South African town, she is happy until she overhears some friends say that she would never marry. At those words, her delicately balanced little world overturns, and she suddenly realizes that it is desirable to have a husband, to be like the rest of her circle. Unconsciously, she begins looking for a man to marry, and she finds Dick Turner. He is a farmer- a hardworking sensitive man with an intense love of his land, a stubborn pride- but with a fatal weakness. When Dick takes her to his farm in the veldt, Mary steps into a life completely different from anything she has ever imagined. She hates the stuffy little house; she hates the natives; she hates Dick at times and most of all, she hates the burning heat and the loneliness. Thus, Mary gives up looking for her own individuality and self, and stays in the fold of her matrimony.

The moment a girl reaches adolescence, she is reminded of her femininity. The double standards and dichotomous attitude which continues to operate throughout a woman's life start right in her parent's home. She is prevented from developing her individuality. She is constantly reminded by her mother that a girl is destined for man and the one who gets the most masculine attention is the luckiest one. A woman in a male-dominated society is thus conditioned into the emotional and cognitive traits of subordination and dependence (Arora, 1991:53).

After one attempt to return to her life in town, she stays on the farm, listening to the strident din of the cicadas and fighting against the realization that the security and happiness which she and Dick need so desperately might never come.

Little by little the years work their slow poison. And then finally one heat- laden afternoon, without realizing what she has done, Mary Turner lights the fuse that leads to a shattering explosion of violence and tragedy. She succumbs to the charms of her masculine and

obscenely powerful native houseboy, Moses, whom she whiplashed earlier on the farm. This upsets the 'ideas of right' of a young Englishman, Tony Marston, and he orders Moses to leave. Mary, who earlier saw a way out of her predicament through Moses, now feels that Tony may now lead her to "salvation". But soon she decides to be her own self and marches towards destruction. Moses avenges the insults, humiliations and atrocities of the centuries that have been heaped on the natives by the whites by murdering Mary and surrendering himself to the police.

The Grass is Singing is a serious study of the moral collapse of a woman- which comes to represent the fall of white rule in Africa- as well as an exploration of that seeming eternal quartet of dividers- race, nationality, gender and class. The opening chapter of this book reaches further into the future than any later chapter. We are introduced to Tony Marston, a young Englishman who has been in Rhodesia for only three weeks. Working with Dick, he is shocked at the sinisterly casual racism of the white Rhodesian. 'His ideas of right', fostered in Britain, 'were upset'. He is assured time and again, though, that once he gets to know the country a little more, he will get used to our ideas about the native. And so he does. White civilization in Rhodesia is Orwellian in make-up. Boundaries are imposed on thought. Inside or outside them, nobody recognizes their existence. Charlie knows that the murder is nothing like the black and white, open and shut case it is widely portrayed to be. But the authorities aren't swept aside; somehow they just aren't seen. Charlie knows that the murdered had been sleeping with the murderer. He sees the mitigating factors, but when his moral fiber is tested he sits down as if he were already in the office he soon leaves the farm to work in, where, shall we say, he gets to know the country a little more. Charlie is our paradigm. His is the departure of conscience.

While not quite a fully fledged *roman a clef*, *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 these characters' mindsets first found life not in Lessing's words, but in Lessing's compatriots and classmates. It's 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. Not long passes before Mary is pointing her watch at the natives. Humanity may worship different Gods, but it is governed by only one colourless time. In 1950, when Lessing's grass first sang, time was running out on the empire. This song artfully recounts and relates the inevitable disintegration of the white psyche that preceded its fall.

This novel is an attempt by an African woman novelist who happened to be in that part of the country and knew full well the living conditions of the people living there. British settlers

were pouring in that country and majority of them adopted the vocation of farming. They employed Africans as good labour force for the purpose. But the relation between the white and the non- whites was showing a wide gulf of misunderstanding towards each other. The whites were hostile to their native Negroes and the black African had the same suspicious attitude towards them.

Doris Lessing was brought up on a farm in Southern Rhodesia and she was fully acquainted with the isolation and the racial exploitation of white colonial rule. She draws from her own experience of colonial relations in the apartheid – ridden Dark Continent. The central theme in the novel *The Grass is Singing* is about a white farmer's wife drowned into a doomed affair with a native. It depicts like her other novel *Children of Violence* and *The Golden Notebook* which contain sexual, political and intellectual development in the country. The novel thus amply proves the triumph of destruction over growth as Eliot's analysis of modern civilization highlights this aspect of modern civilization. It embodies this aspect of modern civilization.

It embodies the first time, the weakness and failures of the white civilization in colonial Africa in race relations. In 1950, when the book was published, the hated practice of apartheid was relentlessly pursued in the Dark Continent for the natives. For them, there was no hope and prospect of freedom of liberation from foreign rule. Thus the novel highlights the growing atmosphere of alienation, relentless heat and the physical presence of the land and that the fact that the white South African rule will come to its end very soon. In the end, the tragic happenings in the life of Dick and Mary point to this inevitable fact. They would be swallowed up and would disappear soon into oblivion as both were frustrated, exhausted and completely disillusioned in life. As one critic comments on the situation in the following way, "That they (Dick and Mary) seemed to be slowly swallowed up by the country they found so unforgiving, just as the Rhodesian bush will move in to realm the farm they once carved into it".

What happens in the lives of the white population and the black African is made clear through the tragic story of Dick and Mary. The couple is most unhappy and feels frustrated, disillusioned despite all possible efforts to establish themselves. There is a newspaper report, 'Murder Mystery' and soon it comes to life that Mary, wife of an indigent farmer has been found murdered in her homestead by her own domestic servant. The accused, Moses had confessed his involvement with the crime. But what was the reaction of the white people is worthy of note and consideration as it shows the real cause of this sensational case of murder. There was a lot of conjecturing and there was a muted mixed reaction among the white farming race.

The plot of the novel is co-related with the theme or purpose of the novel, Moses surrenders to the police and his confession of the crime brought out this fact that a slave had murdered a sacrosanct white woman for satisfying his lust. Thus, we find a growing atmosphere of alienation, the physical presence of the land as clear enough to show the land under colonial rule of the white with no hope and prospects of its liberation. Thus, in the end of the novel, Dick and Mary's life seemed nothing and they disappear into oblivion. They both are bitter and far-away with each other; they're not even sexually grown-up. For Mary, if her acquaintances and those around "hadn't made her get married, Mary would have pursued her comfortable, independent stereotypical female secretarial role" (Batra, 2008:119). According to Jean Pickering, there are three chief issues of race, class and gender. Pickering explains the man – female bond as follows:

Although the white settlers grew up in a class society, the class attitudes of the collective have simplified into consideration of us, the Whites, and them, the Blacks. But there is another value system that complicates the issue. In white settler society men outrank women even more than they do at "home" in middle-class England (1990: 19).

The novel shows one different aspect of race relationship on different level- on personal level as well. The mindset of the white and the black native was entirely working on different lines. They would think of other as natural enemy and the characters in the novel represent very sardonically, yet very accurately the racist outlook of the characters. There might be tension because of color bar and racial outlook and the two communities could not live in peace and harmony. And yet the sexual relationship between the white and the black was unthinkable and unimaginable. That happened and it proved itself disastrous in the life of both- Mary, the housewife of white farmer and Moses, the house boy. A powerful indictment of race relations and the apartheid days in Southern Africa on one side and the murder by a native was another issue which was on the lips of many. Of course, for the two white men, Slatter and Deuhum, it was a routine matter. They attribute it to the innate propensity of the natives to steal, rob, rape and murder their white masters. The white settlers treated the natives cruelly and inhumanly. They were mercilessly whipped and beaten at work. But the most startling thing about it was the sex and its power.

We find a graphic description of Mary's last hours on the Turner farm. She was worried on that night because of the behaviour of Moses, the domestic servant, who was snubbed by Dick for his dressing of Mary in her bed room. Charlie had already warned Dick that the native should not be given liberty to come closer to the white. Mary was not torn between Dick and Moses but it is Tony and Moses. Mary gave up the idea of getting salvation with the help of

Marston, to take her away from the life of drudgery. Now, Mary's mind is full of apprehensions about Moses. He was humiliated by Tony Marston, and might have felt that Tony has replaced him in Mary's life and affections. She was apprehensive that Moses would avenge himself on the white man. Thus he becomes emblematic of the black man who has, at last, avenged all the insults, humiliations and atrocities perpetrated on his race for centuries by the white man.

Dick Turner may not be a tragic figure, but he is certainly pitiable. Honest, hardworking and upright, Dick is a man of integrity. He is in love with his farm and he wants it to work at any cost. He is 'obdurate' in this respect and he sticks to the farm till the very end. And when loses both his farm and his wife, he goes mad. He is basically a decent human being who is continuously dogged by ill-luck on his farm and in the other ventures that he undertakes in order to augment his income. An only child of his parents, who are long dead, he has been brought up somewhere in the suburbs of Johannesburg. His mother had a hard time bringing him up and, like Mary he loved his mother and 'resented' his father. Dick and Mary is a mismatched couple. Mary's feeling on their relation, at the time of their wedding night was as follows:

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, 1994: 66-67).

When Dick tells her that he is too poor to afford a honeymoon, she is relieved. She has never been interested in sex and doesn't want to have any children. "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, 1979:19). Throughout her married life Mary feels 'bodiless' when she comes into contact with her husband. In the end he becomes a mere 'abstraction' to Mary. His self-debasing attitude pleases and gratifies her. "Mary believes that a woman would normally suffer from the male power in society, even though she admits that she herself does not face this oppression" (Alia'a Yousef Bahlaq, 2011:82).

This story, as a matter of fact, is the story of white couple which reveals the black and terrifying analysis of a failed marriage. In this novel, the treatment of the tragic decline of Mary

and Dick Turner is so overwhelming that it became a metaphor for the whole white presence in Africa. Thus, the novel highlights the oppressive and repressive atmosphere prevailing for the natives there. The theme is closely related to the personal experience of colonial relations in the apartheid- ridden Dark Continent, Africa. One critic has commented thus, “The central concern in the grass is singing, is about a farmer’s wife”.

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