

Kasish

Research Scholar

Department Of English

Banaras Hindu University

Banaras, Uttar Pradesh, India

moninayak7@gmail.com

Female Subjectivity amongst Race, Class and Gender Barricades: A Study of
Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

Abstract

Doris Lessing was brought up in an atmosphere pervaded with racial conflicts. She remained among the Black natives and closely scrutinized their way of life. She witnessed the subservience of Blacks under White masters and how little they were paid back in return which was not enough for their survival. They were treated like slaves and consequently, Blacks did not have any freedom to assert their own will. The novel *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing is a fascinating work of art, which exemplifies the complexity of the Black and White relationship and especially the suffering of a white female under the colonial set-up and its association with the black community. They are trapped in the patriarchal system and the norms of racial subjugation to which they must adhere. The gruesome racial legacies traumatize the 'subhuman' (black natives as considered by Imperialists) of Africa and the female (other) of colonial power. Thus, in the colonial era, the rise of White Imperialism not only hindered the sustenance of black people of Africa but also ostracized the life of white women. This paper intends to study the life of a white female Mary Turner, who is stuck in

the clutches of patriarchy, racism, and class in the novel *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing.

Keywords: race, blacks, white imperialism, patriarchy, subhuman, women subjugation, class

Introduction

The title of the novel *The Grass is Singing* (*GS*) is borrowed from the renowned poem *The Wasteland*, a groundbreaking work of the modernist era by T. S. Eliot, to unravel the sterility and barrenness of White civilization in Africa. The grass is singing for rain and it anticipates change as the Black natives are suffering from the disgusting mental, social, economic, and spiritual disintegration caused due to vigorous racial discrimination forced upon them. The story revolves around three main characters, Dick Turner, Mary Turner, and their Black servant, Moses. Lessing embodies the female protagonist Mary who is seized underneath the patriarchal structures and racial norms. Roberta Rubenstein rightly observes that *The Grass is Singing* is concerned “about social, economic and political structures, with being female in a conventional man’s world” (17).

Mary as Emancipated Woman in the Beginning

Lessing’s female protagonist Mary Turner is a self-governed and resilient woman who opposes the norms of patriarchal stereotypes. In this novel, Lessing states about the liberation of Mary that by “the time she was twenty she had a good job, her own friends, a niche in the town” (*GS* 35). Being an independent woman, Mary could sustain her life in a dignified manner because she was aware of her mother’s dependency on her father. Her mother was a desperate and helpless woman, unable to nurture her three children which always created a terrible atmosphere in her home. Mary was brought up in such a broken family, so she craved freedom. This forced her to develop a place of seclusion without any authority, a substitute for her blemished childhood. And “[b]eing alone in the world had no terrors for her at all” (35) as she was away from the past life which has caused enormous

damage to her psyche. Mary thwarts her dependency on her father and lives a separate life on her terms as if she is dismantling the notion that a woman cannot be financially self-secure. In other words, Mary is challenging the patriarchal structures of society which are embedded deeply within it. She fabricates her habitat in the town and decently performs her duties, befriends very good male friends, enjoys life to the fullest by relishing different sorts of entertainment like watching movies, and playing games, and considers herself a little girl, happy in her state, without any vexation.

Mary's Self Caught underneath the Authority of Patriarchy

Mary gets deeply wounded after hearing the conversations of her friends about her 'girlish' look and still being single at the age of thirty. These conversations from her close friends with whom she shared moments, haunt her for hours, and then she decides on the marital alliance. Mary could not resist herself though she detests marriage and unthinkingly gets married to a fifty-year-old widower. But this hasty marriage does not culminate in physical consummation, as she runs away at night and weeps bitterly. She cannot tolerate such an old man as she considers herself to be a little girl. She is repulsed sexually because of the hidden suffering lying underneath the surface of her independent existence. In this context, Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* rightly posited that "the sexual urge is shaped by society" (132). Mary is unable to establish any physical intimacy because of the factors like Dick's impoverishment and prevailing social ideologies.

At this moment when her friends become judgmental about her, she becomes a topic of discussion in the town which annoys her. In this state of emotional turmoil and agony, Dick whom she meets by chance in the picture hall provides her relief and she gets engaged to him. Mary and Dick have huge differences which catapult their conjugal life. The only similarity they conjure is that they were eager to marry for their needs and not for their affections. Dick could not conform to the town life of crowds, Mary also desired for simple

existence without any authorial presence in her life. So, in a sudden fit of temper she thought, she could procure her ambitions from him, which turns out to be a great deception. The outcome of loveless and ill-matched marriage is devastating and it results in a grave and severe impulse, causing catastrophe for the human mind.

Mary is Stuck in the institution of Marriage which makes her a Cruel Master

Joy Wang in the essay, "White Postcolonial Guilt" says that "Mary's belligerence is a clear projection of her anger against unsatisfactory marriage and the oppressive, gendered social norms that led to its existence" (40). After their hasty marriage, Mary stays with Dick on the farm where she is reminded of her childhood misery as Dick's house is the manifestation of his poverty and loneliness. She tries to adapt to the situation by spending time in embroidery, decorating her house, and painting it. She spends all her savings on her house to make it look nice still; Dick and Mary are not able to transform their conjugal life due to poverty and unsettlement. Dick carries out his duties on the farm but the curse of his destiny cannot spare him to prosper, thereby he suffers losses. He tries his luck in manifold businesses but ultimately, he fails in each endeavor, leading to impoverishment. Thus, it can be inferred that a blissful marriage must have financial support so that it can continue efficiently without any tribulations. Mary becomes the symbol of an adamant white lady and her intolerance of black natives leads her to discard the black servants from her house on petty grounds. The inhuman and brutal treatment of the native is justified when she disdains the native black man and woman at the 'kaffir store' and she also whips a black man named Moses, who is later appointed as her houseboy. Mary harbours such intense racist feelings that for most of her time she hasn't spoken to the native people. As a child, she was forbidden from talking to people and taught to be afraid of them. Her disparagement of the natives is the affirmation of her authority over the black people, that for a long period have been denied to her for her being a woman and this authority propagates her repressed feelings and desires

through the legitimacy of cruel racism. The external world of chaos is the recognition of inner distortions, fragmentation, and self-division which is vividly expounded in personal and social institutions. In this way, Lessing's novel is a reflection of different dimensions of liaison stuck between white minds and the world of black natives. The problem of racial prejudice has been studied by Lessing in this novel with profound contemplation and noble sentiment.

Mary is living apparently in a simple house without having any expectations from her husband. Her resentment is not against the poor and shabby condition of the house but the native black people. Her brutal action toward the natives is somewhat mysterious. At this stage of her life, her lack of compassion does not allow her to engage with people in general terms. Mrs. Slatter feels sympathetic towards Mary but she despises her friendship taking into account Mrs. Slatter's genuine kindness as her patronizing and judgmental behaviour. She has been extremely contemptuous to other people that cease her social interactions and in general, she has become alienated in personal and social terms. Mary becomes stiff, haughty, and rude in demeanor in the sense that she is unable to personify her feminine ideals of kindness, compassion, and gentle etiquette. Dick's experiment with his farm and business infuriates Mary to such an extent as if she would end her life. She feels completely trapped in the marriage and she tries to suppress her agony towards him because she cannot confront the situation. She feels herself to be caught under the same labyrinth of resentment that her mother felt for her father. Mary and Dick transcended the stage of isolation at the beginning of their lives but in reality, they become more isolated than ever. Mary scorns the rural stores because of the grief-stricken commemoration of her childhood and her father's drinking. She severely scorns the idea of a 'kaffir store' as it would serve the black people whom she hates intensely.

Mary Desires to Escape from the Intricacies of Race and Gender Policing and her Helplessness

Amid Dick's imagination of farms and earning profit, Mary is lost in her reverie. She becomes desperate about her life and craves to return to the past. Hurryingly, she packs up her luggage and leaves for the town which legitimizes her nonexistent emotions and feelings for the farm and Dick. She nurtured the dream of escape throughout her whole married life. But the situation becomes worst when she arrives at her familiar town and office and is not allowed to live at the girls' club; her old office claims that the vacant position is filled as it is inappropriate for a married woman to work. Lessing here draws attention to the fact that conventions of marriage are different for those women who get divorced or widowed as they cannot return to the previous reputation which they had before marriage and they are compelled to cling to stringent propriety. Mary realizes soon that her enigmatic youth is lost and she is not the same person she used to be once. Her life has changed drastically and her life in the town no longer exists, her 'niche' which she had built earlier is shattered and so without Dick, her life cannot proceed further. Her illusion about her freedom destroys her from within her soul. Mary, at this stage of her life, realizes the naked reality of the existence of women in a society which is patriarchal.

Mary's Angst as a Dictator

Dick becomes ill and cannot tolerate the heat and stress of the work which induces him to bed. Mary reluctantly goes out to the farm to rule the black laborers with the help of a whip that can substantiate her standpoint as a brute and dictator. It is the depiction of a white woman living in a highly racist society. She delivers her angst on the weaker people, children, and even Dick, whom she considers black in his illness. Mary engenders herself as a behaviour superior white woman to exercise her control ceaselessly over her subjects. Her sadistic nature is either about the dismissal of white feminism or the adoption of it. It is

evident from the novel that Mary is dissident against the norms of feminine ideals like nurturing, passivity, compassion, and benignity. Mary associates these attributes with the sign of weakness and she portrays herself as abstaining from those women who depicted maternal qualities in front of her. Mary is engrossed not only in making a profit from the farm but also in her authority over the laborers and treating them as subhuman. Moses, the native laborer becomes the victim of violence by Mary's whip. She becomes a person of authority and her tyrannical behaviour extends to the farmland. Ultimately, she transforms into a fearless woman who no longer cares about ill Dick and neglects her role as a gentle wife.

Mary-Moses Relationship: A Need for Companion

Mary is completely alienated at the later stage of her life and her desire for maternal want is demolished on the account of Dick's denial due to his poverty and incapacity to foster a child. She desires a companion, a girl child with whom she can spend her time. Now, Mary doesn't remain that 'little girl' which she considered herself earlier. Consequently, the rift between Mary and Dick is augmented and they blame each other for all the troubles in their life. The arrival of Moses in their house incites Mary's sexual desire for him which is ceased by her racism and sexual revulsion for Dick. Also, the sexual denial and her abhorrence for all black people force her to create a gaze upon Moses as subhuman. Moses once decides to leave the house of Mary but under her compulsion, he stays back. Moses is a black native and so, his subjectivity is annihilated and remains unexplored. Lessing deliberately did not include Moses' thoughts in the novel to vindicate the White Imperialists' racism and negligence of the lives of black people which squeezes black people merely to the status of animals without many complex internal emotions and liveliness. Mary had whipped Moses brutally and so she could not understand any white person's feeling for the native but when Dick brings Moses home while many servants had stopped working for Mary a new

relationship is established between Moses and Mary and this is reflected in the following lines:

And she was beyond reflecting that her anger, her hysteria, was over nothing she could explain. What had happened was that the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the personal relation; and when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being (which it is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes up in resentment and he brings down the whip. (GS 144)

Sharda Iyer, in her book *Doris Lessing* concerning the relationship of Mary and Moses, points out:

This relationship does not take the form of overt disrespect. He does call her 'madame' instead of the usual 'missus' as most blacks did to their white overlords but "although he was never disrespectful, he forced her, now to treat him as a human. He even dares to touch her, to help to lie down to sleep. (51)

The relationship between Mary and Moses is mysterious in the sense that on account of being a white woman Mary should abide by the terms of white feminine ideologies to live in a society that has the dominant ideology of white settlers. Mary's countering of such stereotypes brings her on the verge of a labyrinth where she is caught among the contradictory forces and she couldn't come out of that continuous quagmire. When she creates a mysterious relationship with Moses then it is predicted that something ruthless will occur. Moses is a black native and a laborer at her farm and so, it is expected from him that he should not cross his boundaries but despite all these restrictions, the relationship that emerges between Mary and Moses was unusual and offending and is revealed in these lines:

He put out his hand reluctantly, loathe to touch her, the sacrosanct white woman, and pushed her by the shoulder; she felt 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. (GS 151)

Moses is physically powerful, strong-willed, and fearless, exhibiting power over Mary that she always expected from Dick, and consequently, she is fascinated by him. Her sexual desire is repressed and disclosed through her dream sequence which is latent in her unconscious mind. In this context Anita Myles in *Doris Lessing* points out:

Mary cannot openly revolt against Moses' employment in the house. She is mortally afraid of him and yet she gets gradually attracted to him. Moses turns out to be an "objective correlative" for her latent sexual frustration. Mary cannot break the Whiteman's code by openly accepting the truth, not even to herself. Her acute poverty and inner conflict, due to sexual diversion towards a tabooed man, hastens up the process of her mental disintegration. She continuously struggles with the fact that Moses can redeem her from her depression. But she cannot take his help; he is a black and, therefore, inferior to her. Mary is constantly gripped by the fear that she had ill-treated, abused and slapped Moses, and now he enjoys a strange hold over her. Later, out of jealousy and revenge he murders her. (21)

Turners are isolated among the other white settlers in the community. They have a miserable and publically discontented marriage which compels the other settlers to maintain distance from them. Turners turn out to be the matter of their talk. Mary is overtaken by a nervous breakdown and becomes irritable as she is leading her life in a brutal, isolated, and perverse world, creating a non-racial transgression in her mind. She understands the impossibility of the violation of the idea of White feminine ideals and her sexual union with Moses. Moreover, in this state of anguish, the only person she can rely upon for insistence is Moses who helps Mary to get dressed by pulling her dress from her head and doing it up from

behind. The subjection of Mary's feminine self begins when she starts living in the fear of Moses and bit by bit Moses becomes her master. This subjection can be justified in the novel as:

For 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 - 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 blank submissiveness. Then he accepted, because he was at fault. And now she began to avoid him. . . . And she was held in balance, not knowing what this new tension was that she could not break down. (GS 154-55)

Mary acknowledges Moses' kind behaviour and is scared of Dick's seeing them together. Now, Mary's exploits are stimulated by her thoughts and feelings and the only person who matters in her life is Moses. As Mary is an old age female and belongs to the weaker sex, Moses avenges the racial guilt by culminating it in her murder, which is the result of mutual distrust between black and White Imperialists. Moses' murder of Mary is the materialization of the deep level of oppression which is never visible in his outer behaviour. In an interview with Doris Lessing, Stephen Gray enquires about the Mary-Moses relationship to which, Lessing replies that Mary is

a very psychologically frail woman and put her in an environment like that, of course, she's going to become dominated by a strong personality. It doesn't really

matter who it would be, black or white. . . . a novel gets made up from so many different things. And I remember listening as a child to the people talking on the veranda about this woman, a neighbor who allowed her servant to do her dress up the back and to brush her hair. Now this was so . . . impossible; I remember now the note in their voices of sheer awe- was she mad, what was wrong with her? - there was a note of doom, horror. I don't remember who this terrible woman who allowed this servant to button her up was. But I don't have to tell . . . how to them it was impossible. What would this black man have thought? And so the story coalesced around the Marston character, who wouldn't have understood a word of all that. (332-33)

Conclusion

The plot of *The Grass is Singing* is linear and simple with an omniscient narrator. Through this narrative, Lessing depicts the crucial and complex issues of class, race, and gender leading to the destruction of the social and personal life of a few individuals creating a huge impact on the indigenous society. In a racially privileged society, Whites will inevitably succeed. Without racial superiority, any person be it a man or woman of the White community, is diminished to the level of natives. The failure of a white individual thus threatens the myth of White authority. Black men become poor concerning their inability to work by the standards of White myth, which makes the White man affluent. So the gap is created between the white and black settlers of society. Doris Lessing probes into the lives of human beings who are trapped in the realm of Black and White segregation, mental dilemma, and spiritual and moral crises, their constant sufferings consuming their real selves and self-motivated desires, ultimately making them hollow, dejected, and disconsolate beings without

any feelings and emotions. Women trapped in these situations have to endure the fact that they must overlook who they are and what their aspirations are like in the case of Mary Turner who becomes schizophrenic due to her forceful deeds aggravated by societal anxiety because somehow she is on the constant watch and governance of patriarchy and racial structures, having no control over her own instinctual and innate feelings and emotions. Throughout the novel, she evolves as suffering and tormented character as throughout her life she only cared for societal and marital institutions and not for her own identity. Though in the beginning, she transgresses the periphery of dominance from her kin still she cannot prolong it as she is caught beneath the clutches of patriarchy and race and can no longer break away from these captive structures which ultimately leads to her nervous breakdown and murder. Mary Turner's character is a brilliant portrayal of a white woman's psyche and identity which are suppressed and destroyed within the patriarchal and gender norms of the white society. Undoubtedly, concerning the context of this novel Lessing is rightly considered a realist author who mirrors the life situations in her literary works to invoke human values in individuals without any subjection and mutual hatred which will ultimately lead to the proper advancement and development of mankind.

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