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### Sense of Belonging: Pangs within Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*.

#### Abstract

Doris Lessing's first novel *The Grass is Singing*, published in the year 1950 is regarded as a twentieth century classic work of art. Lessing through the novel elucidates the Settler woman Mary's problematic situation in a tragic yet glitzy style. Her alienation from the family, society and finally from her husband Dick Turner makes her completely shattered. She terribly needs to belong to someone in her life. Her belonging motif gets dismantled throughout her journey for survival. She becomes a mere puppet in the hands of others. She fails to survive in the modern catastrophic world for she needs more lessons regarding the hypocrisies. Her futile attempts to suppress emotions and feeling were crushed by her successful contemporaries. The paper tries to throw light on the complexities of racism and survival quest in the African situation.

Keywords: Alienation, Survival, Racism and Belonging.

Much of the social-realist fiction of the nineteenth century makes an evaluative emphasis on the importance of involving a pervasive set of thoughts. This should be made obvious as we address ourselves to Lessing, for she inherits and explicitly acknowledges the influence of several central manifestations of this tradition. Her works seems to be as structural to her interpretation of reality, and especially with regard to the reality of life in the Dark Continent, Africa. Literature tends to show transformations with the passage of time. Over five centuries we appear to have inherited a preoccupation with the “lower orders” of life - with children, women, peasants and savages - people whose mental life, it is felt, is less overlaid than that of the educated adult male by the restraints of rationality and social habit.

*The Grass is Singing* revolves around three main characters, Dick Turner, Mary Turner and their Black servant, Moses. The novel simultaneously deciphers the man-woman relationship and the burning issue of apartheid. Dick Turner proves to be a complete failure in life compelling his wife Mary to drift closer to Moses. Soon he perceives white fingers pointing at her accusingly. Mary got substantial emotional satisfaction from Moses but the relationship had to be discontinued due to the conflagrating problem of apartheid.

The novel unfolds Lessing’s anxiety about social, economic and political structures, the problem of women existing in the male dominated world, and also that crucial relationship existing between the white masters and the Black African servants, at the same time accelerating through abnormal consciousness, fragmentation, self-division, breakdown and subjective distortion of perception and the implicit questions about the external prospective of events.

The women’s liberation question is very close to Lessing’s heart. A woman’s loneliness in a man’s world is the basic problem dealt with not only in *The Grass is Singing*, but also in her most important works. This is the reason why most of Lessing’s novels are

dominated by female protagonists. In the portrayal of characters, Lessing is not concerned with hero as victim but she points her perception of the modern man between these two extremes of the victim and the rebel and looks upon the character as a struggling survivor in this catastrophic world.

Because of the destruction of her old self and her inability to create a new one the problem of survival becomes crucial for Mary. Mary in order to fulfil a social obligation desperately plunges into marriage with Dick Turner. Mary, who once hoped to save herself from marriage, now expects marriage to save her from herself. She accepts Dick because his worship restores "her feeling of Superiority to men". But her husband's continuing respect fails to save her from her mother's fate.

Mary, on her arrival at the farmhouse after her hasty marriage, feels that she has been brought back to her past. She sees herself about to trace her mother's pitiful footsteps, and she automatically transfers her hatred of her father to Dick. The tiny roofed house fills her with doomed thought that:

And so on; she heard the history of each thing, and saw that what seemed so pathetic and frail to her... that it was not in this house she was sitting, with her husband, but back with her mother...unable to bear it; possessed with the thought that 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.(GS.54-55)

In this novel Charlie Slatter, the spokesman of the 'White Civilization' in South Africa, represents a major mode of survival. He survives on the racial as well as material level by exploiting the labour of the blacks on his farm for more than twenty years. He has therefore hardly any contacts with the natives except in the form of master- servant

relationship. His relationship with the blacks is characterized by a feeling of contempt and domination. He even refuses to accept the blacks as human beings. This racial attitude of Charlie is reflected in the various unwritten laws of colonial Africa.

Lessing succeeds in depicting the extent of apartheid in society. Poignantly the writer deciphers the ill treatment of the blacks by the whites both physically and mentally through the Mary-Moses relationship. Mary, the representative of the white woman, brought up to detest and despise, fear and dominate the black, becomes an object of contempt for the white and black. The whites despise her because she stands before them as the one who has broken the social codes.

It is interesting to note that Mary's repressed sexual desires are coupled with a childlike need to be dependent. Paradoxically this appears, although she does not recognize it, in her encounters with her servants, especially Moses. Unable to admit the possibility of attraction to any of these men, she cultivates her repulsion and her tyrannical will. Mary fears above all a loss of control or a confrontation with her servants which would reveal them to her as persons rather than as functions.

When she begins to break down towards the end of the novel and can scarcely take care of herself or do her routine household chores, she gradually slips under Moses' influence. This dependence got exhausted, slowly, Moses begins to assert an authority over her that is both parental and male-oriented. As she permits him to take care of her, an erotic dimension is revealed, by emotional degrees in their relations.

*The Grass in Singing* carefully plots the progress of Mary's descent into mental illness without the high drama of calling it madness. She is diagnosed by her husband as suffering from a complete nervous breakdown. Mary's condition is eminently believable. The course of the narrative prepares the reader for Mary's loss of sanity explaining the events that led to her

marriage to a highly ethical but failure-ridden young farmer, her physical sufferings in the heart-drenched tin-roofed farmhouse, and finally her removal from normal human relationships.

Mary's desire for a child is also not fulfilled as Dick's dream of having children depends on his dream of becoming a rich farmer. The store intensifies Mary's psychological crisis and her racism. Thus Dick's attempt to survive in the economic and marital context of life fails completely. When he sees his wife murdered by Moses, his black servant and senses the finality of his separation from the land, he descends into madness. Charlie, Tony and Dick however constitute only the broad politics of colonialism.

Doris Lessing and her contradictory mixture of awe and fear is everywhere evident, and it is clear that Africa is essentially being cast as an earlier, and ergo hostile form of life, antipathetic to the white man's civilizing endeavours. She uses the word 'savage' freely here. Sometimes with critical intent in the mouths of explicitly racist characters or via the internal monologues of the mad Mary Turner. But just as often as narrator she blithely invokes 'the savage mind', 'the savage sun', 'the savage heat', and 'the savage and antagonistic bush'. When Mary, in her final moment of tragic anagnorisis, fully acknowledges her 'savage self' - Lessing clarifies by saying that:

All her past slid away, and her mouth, opened in appeal, let out the beginning of a scream...in her stomach, choking her; and she lifted her hands, claw like, to ward him off. And the bush avenged itself; that was her last thought. The trees advanced in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder was the noise of their coming. (GS. 205).

Lessing in the novel tries to give a negative resolution. Neither recovery nor even a natural death will be Mary's lot. Mary seems to intuit that Moses will murder her even though he has spoken no words of anger. On some subliminal level she understands the

impact of her rejection of their relationship. He too, has his pride which Dick and Mary do not recognize. Mary's anticipation and acceptance of her own murder is the act of a madwoman.

She has lost her sense of self-preservation. Rather than elicit help from Dick or their new assistant, Tony Marston, she walks to the spot where Moses will kill her. Her loss of the basic human instinct of self-protection marks the depths of despair of her mental condition. Her death, its brutality, and the author's detachment from the resolution express a special horror.

The theme of survival is specifically explored in the complex relationship between Mary and Moses. Confronted with the now inevitable alienation and drudgery of married life, Mary's instinctive reaction is hostility towards the native servants. Her rejection of sexuality, marriage, and motherhood, her hatred of being female, are most fully projected upon black women.

It is clear from Lessing's explicit social and political statements in the text that she is consciously intending a criticism of any form of racial blindness regarding the humanity of black people. She has also chosen to describe the plight of the white man, and white woman in particular, in struggling to survive and to create a role and identity in the African context. Her criticisms on the farming methods of Slatter and Turner, their attitudes to the land, and treatment of the labourers are candid and too plain for criticisms. The working out of the "social" story to its climax can be analysed in terms of social- democratic politics and realistic fiction techniques.

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