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Apartheid in African Countries as Reflected in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract:

During the colonization period, the African countries were dominated by apartheid policy. The blacks did not have a right to vote and they faced discrimination in every walk of life. Doris Lessing has painted this picture of African world in her novel 'The Grass Is Singing' quite realistically. The novel is set in a rural background of Southern Rhodesia which had been a British colony. Doris Lessing had herself lived in Rhodesia for many years before writing this novel. So there is an autobiographical touch also in the novel.

Keywords: apartheid, Negro, whites, discrimination, prejudice, oppression, labourer etc.

'The Grass Is Singing' is the first novel of Doris Lessing. This novel deals with a variety of themes quite dexterously, the main theme being the problem of apartheid. After the publication and popularity of this novel, Doris Lessing was declared a prohibited alien in both South Africa and Southern Rhodesia in 1956 because she campaigned against nuclear arms and apartheid. African land has been occupied by colonizers for centuries. When the Portuguese occupied Africa, they maintained a distance between the rulers and the ruled. After the Portuguese, when the British colonized this land, they also retained this aloofness from the native Negroes. The natives were to be used like animals and sold like commodities but not to be treated as human beings. All the powers and all the natural resources were in the hands of the whites and all the miseries formed the lot of the Negroes who could not even consult the doctors in their diseases. As Wender Zak (1973) maintains, 'The Grass Is Singing' "is one of those rare works of fiction which acknowledges that basic truth of Marxian analysis" that "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."1

The law implemented in South Africa in 1948, legalized the racial segregation of the rulers and the ruled. Although African society had been divided on the basis of colour for centuries but such legislations systematized this division and made it stricter. The non-whites, comprised mainly of Negroes, were denied social, legal, fundamental and even human rights. They could not purchase land in the area of whites. Marriages were not permitted between the people of different races. Non-whites could not vote. They could not get education and if they went to school, they were not allowed to study English. They were forced to study several subjects in Afrikaans, a West Germanic language, originally the dialect that developed among the Afrikaner Protestant settlers. A large part of farmland and precious places like goldmines were reserved for the white minority. The black majority could work on these farms and in the goldmines only as labourers who were generally underpaid.

All these oppressions caused a feeling of revolt in the heart of non-whites and this feeling has its glimpses in the novel 'The Grass Is Singing'. The novel does not mention any dates or years. So it is difficult to discuss the time period of the setting of the story. But it refers to the World Wars at several places which indicate that it is set in the 1940s. The place is Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in Southern Africa, which was then a British colony. In the novel there are some black policemen, black servants and black labourers. It opens with the news of murder of a white woman by a black man who becomes vindictive after being rejected by the white woman. He is caught by policemen who are black. These black policemen cannot arrest Dick Turner, a white man. In the words of Doris Lessing—

“They let him be, while keeping an eye on him, for he was a white man, though mad, and black men, even when policemen do not lay hands on white flesh.” (pg.12)2

The natives work in agriculture farms producing plenty of grains while they themselves remain half-fed; they make houses for the whites while they themselves live in slums and dingy huts; they work day and night in the goldmines while their destiny never glitters. All the proverbs and philosophies that promise reward for hard work, honesty and perseverance, prove to be false in the case of these natives. They work hard and sweat throughout their life but the promised reward goes to the whites who flourish and enjoy life—

“They, the geese that laid the golden eggs, were still in that state where they did not know there were other ways of living besides producing gold for other people.”(pg14)

The whites need the natives at every step of their life yet they maintain aloofness. The natives are not allowed to participate in the social functions of the whites. They can cook the food for whites but cannot eat with them. They work in the factories that manufacture vehicles but they do not own any vehicle themselves. The extremity of aloofness is that they are not allowed to travel in the same vehicle with the whites. In this novel, there is an incident where the black murderer is not carried in the same car along with the murdered white woman Mary Turner—

“They could not put Moses the murderer into the same car with her; one could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she were dead, and murdered by him.”(pg24)

Colonial system forbids any liaison between the blacks and whites while it provides all the favourable conditions for that. The blacks are always there in the kitchen and homes of white women. White males feel insecurity because of the more potent black males. Harris says, “by maintaining that sexual contact between black males and white females is taboo, he (the white man) eliminates that mythic phallic symbol, which he himself created, from competition with himself; for there is always the realistic possibility that if the black men are so favourably endowed, the white man tells his women that coupling with black men is tantamount to coupling with an ape or some other subhuman species.”³The white race has always been obsessed with a sense of superiority. It considers itself to be superior intellectually, physically and emotionally. The whites are unable to digest the strong built of the natives. It is beyond their imagination that any white woman should be attracted towards a black man. If it happens, they are unable to tolerate it. They blame only the blacks and punish them. The whites defend themselves at the cost of blacks. The black man is to be punished for his own as well as for the white woman's adultery. In the present novel Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant represent this attitude of the whites—

“It was ‘white civilization’ fighting to defend itself that had been implicit in the attitude of Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant, ‘white civilization’ which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. So above all, it cannot afford failures, such as the Turners’ failure.”(pg26)

The whites inculcate in their children a fear against the Negros. Children are taught to suspect the natives. Qualities like honesty and good character are not associated with Negros by them. Being born as a Negro is a curse in itself. The character is judged by the complexion—dark complexion, dark character; bright complexion, bright character. This blind method of evaluation forms an inextricable part of white civilization. Doris Lessing describes this prejudiced approach in the novel as follows—

“..but the ‘native problem’ meant for her other women’s complaints of their servants at tea parties. She was afraid of them, of course. Every woman in South Africa is brought up to be. In her childhood she had asked why, she had been told in the furtive, lowered, but matter of fact voice she associated with her mother, that they were nasty and might do horrible things to her.”(pg59)

The Negros cannot decide their working hours and they cannot fix their wages. They have to work as long as their white master wants for as less money as the master pays. A Negro cannot complain against the long working hours and less wages. The white master does not care whether the native has sufficient food to fill his belly, sufficient clothes to cover his body or proper lodging for his family. The master’s work should be done at any cost—

“She never thought of natives as people who had to eat or sleep: they were either there or they were not; and what their lives were when they were out of her sight she had never paused to think.”(pg74)

In this novel, we see two types of whites- quite opposite to each other- those who stay in Britain, believe in the principles of justice and equality like Tony Marston while the British settlers in Africa believe in their racial superiority and behave brutally with the natives like Mary Turner and Charlie Slatter. The white people, who are the masters everywhere, are never satisfied with the labourers who sweat continuously. The natives are called lazy and work evaders even after such hard work. They are whipped and abused by the masters. The whites justify all their oppressions while the blacks are not given any opportunity to defend themselves despite being honest and guiltless. The leading female character in the novel, Mary Turner says—

“If you want to get work out of them you have to know how to manage them. You shouldn’t expect too much. They are nothing but savages after all.”(pg78)

These savages are to be civilized by the Europeans. This is the unquestionable duty of the whites in all the African colonies. Colonialism will bring all types of development in Africa. The natives are to be taught the value of hard work but not democracy and equality. The reason is that democracy and equality will be harmful for them. So the value of hard work is to be learnt by the natives under white supervision. The whites opine that the blacks are to climb the stairs of civilization one by one and it will take the time of many generations before

the Africans reach where the Europeans are today. As Brett L. Shaddle says, “As nineteenth century wore on, scientists constructed ever more elaborate rankings of people by race, and by their race’s level of development. Settlers had little doubt that they, as whites, were more civilized than Africans, and this would remain the case for generations or centuries to come.”⁴ Mary Turner, a white woman, hates these Negroes but she has to deal with them because farming is not possible without these labourers. She is a hard task master and gets angry if a worker stops to take rest without her permission—

“It seemed to her an insolence directed against her authority over them when they stopped, without permission, to straighten their backs and wipe off the sweat.”(pg112)

When the human rights champions pressurized the government, it passed a law which did not allow the white farmer to strike his natives. The whites had behind them the police, the courts, the jails while the natives had nothing but their patience. Yet the whites got maddened by the thought that the blacks had even the right to appeal. They believed that a white farmer had a natural right to treat his labour as he pleased.

In the novel, there is often a reference to ‘mission boy’. These are generally those natives who become Christians, learn English and wear sophisticated clothes. But the whites like Charlie Slatter in this novel do not like these educated blacks and humiliate them time and again so that they may not have courage enough to compete with the colonizers. The whites say that they have brought the light of civilization to these dark African lands. So the blacks should obey them, respect them and serve them instead of competing with them. They assume themselves to be guardians of the natives and expect gratitude from natives for this role of guardianship. Manion writes, “The constant necessity of keeping a whole race, who outnumber their masters, in subordination seems to require an exaggeration of the stereotype of masculinity. White men must really be men—strong, aggressive, sure of themselves, in command. The colonial venture elicits and exalts all the elements of machismo.”⁵

Thus we see that this novel reflects its contemporary rural African society very realistically. The legislation of apartheid in the South Africa was implemented in 1948 and the novel ‘The Grass Is Singing’ was published in 1950. So we see an authentic picture of racial segregation in this novel. If a person does not know anything about the apartheid, this novel alone can familiarize him very well with that discriminative policy.

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