

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed and Indexed eJournal

9th Year of Open Access

Vol. 9, Issue-IV August 2018

Editor-In-Chief- **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**



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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Search for Identity and Reality in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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Article History: Submitted-09/07/2018, Revised-21/08/2018, Accepted-01/09/2018, Published-15/09/2018.

Abstract:

Doris Lessing is one of the most noteworthy postcolonial writers, made her entrance as a novelist with *The Grass Is Singing* (1950). The novel deals with racial politics between White and Black. Set in the days of apartheid - institutionalized racism, the novel discovers themes recounted to the result of apartheid on the day-to-day lives of human beings both black and white, as well as the slow bubbling nature of revenge and an individual's need for self-identity to avoid facing uncomfortable truths. The present research paper aims to present the search for individual's identity as well as the socio-political reality of postcolonial world in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is singing*.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Racism, Identity, Social and Political Reality.

Doris Lessing's debut novel *The Grass is singing* (1950) is regarded as a land mark of the twentieth century English literature. A masterpiece of social and political realism in post colonial world, the action of the novel is set in Rhodesia [now in Zimbabwe] in South Africa in the late 1940s. The novel is set in colonized landscape and concerned with the issues of colour bar and its disastrous effect on the marginal whites and the native Africans. Doris Lessing holds a place of singular distinction in the history of post-war British literature. Lessing was born as Doris May Tayler in Iran, on 22nd October 1919. Lessing, a broad writer, is determined to contribute to the great tradition of realism from the very beginning of her writing career. The sheer scope, number and variety of her work have given her a unique position among the twentieth century women writers.

Ruth Whittaker, one of the readers of Lessing's works, commented on this novel as, "an extraordinary first novel in its assured treatment of its unusual subject matter... Doris Lessing questions the entire values of Rhodesian white colonial society" (88).

The Grass is Singing describes the life events of Mary Turner outlined by colonial understanding in the Rhodesian veld and South Africa, and questions the whole values of the Rhodesian white colonial civilization. Lessing spins an intricate text, interweaving Mary's life and struggle in a colonial world. In vivacious details, Lessing portrays the effects of a society under migration – a society polluted by the firm infrastructure of patriarchy – giving rise to gender and race prejudices. The author traces Mary's psychological growth during the numerous phases of her life – from an indigent, unhappy childhood to her unnatural death at the hand of her native houseboy and in the process politically exposes the futility and feebleness of a patriarchal colonial system. Lessing accurately portrays the chaos caused in a society under imperialism – search for identity, reality, hierarchy, racism and oppression.

The novel *The Grass is Singing* opens with a report relating to the murder of the protagonist Mary Turner, who has been for several months running a farm in Rhodesia. The introductory paragraph of the novel acts as a good indication of the context in which the story is written. It reads as follows:

Marry Turner, wife of Richard Turner, a farmer at Rhodesia, was found murdered on the front verandah of their homestead yesterday morning. The houseboy, who has been captured, has admitted to the crime. No cause has been discovered. It is considered he was in search of valuables. [3]

The notion of supremacy and the discriminatory attitude displayed by white characters are the two main themes in *The Grass is Singing*. Tony Marston a new white takes a natural stand in unraveling the murder mystery. As a farm assistant to Dick Turners, he has closely observed Mary's demeanor and her treatment of Moses for a few days before the tragedy. But we come to know his racist and political stand point in the following lines:

Although, in the interval, there would be a little short moments when he would see the things visibly, and understands that it was 'white civilization' fighting to secure itself that had been implicit in the attitude of Charlie Solatter and the sergent's white civilization which will never, never admit that a white women can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. (4)

Here one could reveal the idea of how prejudice and racism are present in the Rhodesian racist society. Furthermore, the news in the paper suggests the colonial attitude of the colonizer. Throughout the novel, Doris Lessing presents how the white people use their political power to

steel all the belonging of the black native people in Rhodesia. Here, the reader understands that the social and political conditions of the colonized people are worst and disastrous. They are treated as slaves, who work to fulfill the lust, and desire of the whites. Doris Lessing puts critically social race theory in practice in her novel, through her characters. Mary Turner and Charlie Slatter, are the two such characters that are not afraid to turn to violence and abuse in disciplining the farm laborers. In turn, the workers obey all their instructions and adhere to the masters' needs without dispute.

Sketching the reactions of the British members of the society living in the district, Lessing offers an in-depth view of the defective society Mary belonged to. Lessing, who is well known for her active support and participation in women's movements, instilled in the novel, a harsh criticism of the patriarchal colonial system, which immobilized women, denying them an agency – their right to economic independence and a construction of their own identity. In the course of the character of Mary Turner, the protagonist, Lessing shows the traditional society of Rhodesia – the elements of racial and gender injustices that tapered the spirit of Mary, disgusting her and leading her to her death.

Mary's early childhood is shaped under the pressure of an cruel father who wastes his money on drink while his family is living in despair and poverty. Her mother who is her first model of gender role: a submissive and helpless lady dominated by the crushing manly patterns, nonetheless the complying sufferer of poverty (33).

Besides sharing the stings of poverty and living in “a little house that was like a tiny wooden box on slots” (36) and the fight of her parents over money, Mary has been the witness of their sexuality and her mother's body in the hands of a man who was simply not present for her (36). Throughout her life, Mary tries to forget these reminiscences but in fact she has just repressed them with the fear of sexuality which comes up shortly dreadfully in her dreams. By perceiving her mother as a feminine target of a depressed marriage, she internalizes a negative picture of femininity in the structure of sexual oppression, taking over her mother's sweltered feminism.

In order to escape from this tragic repetition and after her mother's death, Mary finds a job as a secretary in the town at sixteen and begins a lonely life. By dropping her father, she seems “in some way to be avenging her mother's sufferings and to cut herself from her past (35). Her final relief comes after her father's death that not anything remains to unite her with the past. Trying to forget her distressing memories, she remains a girl, choosing to live in a girls' club,

wearing her hair in a little-girl fashion. She does not believe her shyness, childishness and detachment as weakness; as a subject of fact, she is insensible of them. But then a turning point approaches in her life when she listens to her intimate friends discussing her age and marriage. She is shocked to hear them commenting that there is “something missing somewhere” (42) in her, just because she, not yet thirty, is still unwedded.

To be thirty and single in a white colonial society is almost a form of deviation. Her personal position becomes a reason for apprehension, reinforced by her alertness that her peculiarities are subject to public analysis. In extreme anxiety, she marries the first man capable to offer her an acceptable way out – Dick Turner. Dick's motivation is equally inadequate. Lacking self-knowledge, he craves for marriage in its lovingly idealized form, as a way of fulfilling a set of socially created expectations. Although identical in their sentimental flatness, Dick and Mary Turner only have their requirements in common, while, sensitively, they are worlds apart.

Loneliness is the only common point between the two, who have different pasts, different experiences and different backgrounds. While Mary “loved the town, felt safe there” (50), Dick dislikes the town-culture. Being a farmer, he loves spending most of his time on his farm. After marriage also, Dick remains hard in his farm work going in the morning, coming back late in the evening and retiring to bed at once after supper. The sexual association of Mary and Dick also is not very reasonable. Even sex does not bring them nearer; it rather divides them. The narrator describes this failure through Mary's sexual uniqueness and the clearly insufficient sexual association between her and Dick:

It was not so bad, when it was all over: not as bad as that. It meant nothing to her, nothing at all. Expecting anger and imposition, she was reduced to find she felt zero. She was able tenderly to confer the gift of herself on this modest stranger, and stay untouched. women have a strange ability to take out from the sexual relationship, to protect themselves against it, in such a way that their men can be left experiencing down and insulted without having anything touchable 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. (55)

Mary's marriage not only proves her helplessness to transcend her gendered bias, but also her inability to escape from her class. She feels feeble and dissatisfied as if "her father, from his seriousness, had sent out his will and vigoured her back into the kind of life he had made her mother go ahead" (54). She sees the meagerness and narrowness of her family's life follow her in her marriage. Poverty from which Mary has always tried to escape tracks her in her ill-matched marriage.

Roberta Rubenstein in his work *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness*, rightly observes that the novel *The Grass is Singing* "concerns about social, economic and political structures, with being female in a conventional man's world" (17). Mary's marriage condition is:

The women who marry Dick study sooner or later that there are two things they can do: they can make themselves mad, tear themselves into parts in storms of useless anger and rebellion; or they can hold themselves tight and go bitter. Mary with the recollection of her own mother returning more and more normally, like an older, sarcastic double of herself walking at the side of her, followed the track her upbringing made unavoidable (110)

The gulf between the two, however, keeps on widening. Mary, used to the city, does not feel at home on Dick's rustic farm. She meets the black house servant, Samson. She disgusts Dick for his kindness to Samson, which she senses in unwarranted. She takes power of the household, becoming so grudging with Samson that he lastly offers his resignation. Tensions increase between Mary and Dick, as he grows aggravated with her squander of precious water and lack of interest in sex. She meets but dislikes Charlie Slatter and his wife, finding them patronizing. The Turners cycle through one black house servant after another, as Mary's iron fist drives them away.

Dick engages in an ill-fated project to run a bee farm, and Mary begins to suspect that he is not nearly as good of a farmer as he lets on. He then decides to open a kaffirstore, a shop for native black Rhodesians. Mary is disgusted by her customers and the store does poorly. Dick has more failed business projects trying to raise pigs, turkeys, then rabbits. She learns that Charlie Slatter plans to buy Dick's farm when he unavoidably goes bankrupt, and runs off to the city to try to get her old job back. But after her old boss refuses her and she's incapable to pay

her hotel bill, Mary understands her old life has gone everlastingly. She comes back home. Soon after, Dick was influenced by malaria. Mary is forced to nurse him and administer the native workers, whom she fears and hates. But as the weeks pass, Mary finds she likes being in charge, but the workers grow aggrieved of her demands. This conflict comes to a head when one, a man named Moses, rejects to continue work and Mary hits him. She fears he'll hit her back, but he leaves back to work. After Dick gets improved, Mary presents him with her views of how to resourcefully run the farm. He feels high opinion for Mary, but also shame, and over all, anguish and rage that her plans for tobacco farming eventually end in them moving to the city.

Mary leaves Dick to his farming, but a famine damages their first tobacco crop. Mary becomes discouraged, especially after Dick tells her they can't have the investments to have a child. After Dick requests Mary to view the farming with him, she understands they will never be successful due to his ineffectiveness. She sees Moses, the worker she struck in the face, and is torn amid guilt over her actions, deception at his muscular body, and hatred over his race. She is in particular, critical of Moses, but he believes her harsh word without protest. But finally, Moses proclaims he will leave at the end of the month. She requests him to stay, and he unwillingly agrees. She starts dreaming of Moses' body. She instigates to avoid Moses, terrified by her own unconscious thoughts.

Gossip begins to go around the local area about Mary and Dick, that both have begun to lose their marbles. Charlie Slatter, who has not seen the couple in two years, pays a visit. Mary is thin and dressed unsuitably, like a young girl. Slatter tells Dick to take Mary on a trip and sell his farm, promising he can continue on as land manager. Dick agrees, though his wound is apparent. Slatter hires Martson to run the farm in Dick's absence. Marston is shocked by Mary's mental state, Dick's physical weakening, and the decaying farm. He sees Moses helping Mary with her dress, a friendly act considered taboo in a place like Rhodesia. Marston arrays Moses to leave, which sends Mary into a fit. The Turners are to leave for trip the day after next.

Mary awakes the next day and goes about her farm duties in a kind of daydream, feeling that Moses is somewhere on the farm, waiting. She envisages the grass is singing, that the farm will be munched through by the trees and animals when she leaves. She walks through the farm, ultimately encountering Marston, whom she imagines to be Dick. She says to him that she's ill in her heart, and constantly has been. She goes back to the house. Dick tells her to pack for the trip, but Mary has a sense of her awaiting death. She goes to bed alone, but is taken up by

thunder outside, and a sense that Moses is near. She goes onto the veranda and sees Moses coming near. She wonders if she'll be able to make clear herself, but Moses stabs her to death sooner than she can say a word. She dies. Moses cleans his weapon. He makes a decision that he will not pretend to be innocent when the body is found. With the final victory must come the eventual result.

The novel shed light on how the patriarchal familial construction was accepted by colonization and politicized race, society and gender to achieve their desired effects. By declining the race, culture and women, the colonizers successfully refused them an agency- a voice through which they could articulate their identities and a sense of self an operation that deemed them weak and easy prey to subjugation. The discrimination of gender and race is the main force behind the predicament of alienation in Mary Turner's life. Unsuccessful marriage resulted in complete disintegration in her life. The huge gulf that was created in their conjugal life ultimately compelled her to think to be separated from her husband. Lessing going deep into the human psyche portrays that this enormous gulf between individual understandings can never be compensated. This dark gulf is again evident in racial prejudice through the relationship between Mary and her black slave Moses who is represented in this novel as the ambassador of patriarchal society.

Moses, the black slave, killed Mary to take revenge on the White as well as the opposite sex. Mary Turner is not able to take hold of her own identity because her identity is compounded by the overwhelming colonial and gender narratives in which she is bind. She greatly attempts to find a sense of self- an identity without the influence of the colonial culture. Mary breaks through the barriers of patriarchal and colonial culture through inevitable death which sets her free from all terms and conditions that existed in her society. Thus Mary is the only victim of the threat of the patriarchal society. Lessing gracefully shows how the protagonist of the novel suffered and was killed dishonest in the whirlwind of gender and race.

Doris Lessing suggests, through her novel, that the people of post colonial world of Rhodesia need social, political, financial and psychological independence in order to exercise their creative potentiality. They need the people who understand and recognize their social and political identity in a society. In the novel, Mary and Moses are the representative examples of contemporary British and African society. Besides, the people of Rhodesia need a tradition, a

language, an economic and intellectual independence to assert their own individual human identity.

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