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The 'Turner(s)' of Discourses: A Reading of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract:

Michel Foucault's phenomenon of discourse and how it generates and preserves power structures through the controlling of people, is the foundation of Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass Is Singing*. Despite the fact that Foucault did not coin the word "discourse" in relation to colonised nations, his interpretation of the term has been adapted and used throughout the field of postcolonial studies, as shown in the aforementioned book too. My study assesses how the novel's two main protagonists, Mary and Dick Turner, are affected by the divisive culture and colour-bar system that separates the dominant white minority from the marginalized black population. The two characters will further be analysed in connection to their inability to follow the discourse and the consequences this has on their lives. I will also focus on how through their actions and their position as poor whites- they pose a danger to the white society and challenge the white ruling class' nationality.

Keywords: Discourse, Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, Michel Foucault, Postcolonialism, Power structure.

The theme of Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass Is Singing* is discourse, hence we should first focus on the term 'discourse' which was coined by the famous philosopher Michel Foucault. In her book *Discourse*, Sara Mills claims that Foucault's account of discourse is legitimate only when viewed through the lens of colonial rule. She further states that according to Foucault, the various discourses that exist around the world are all generated and enforced with the help of the culture in which the discourse resides. As a result, the discourse confines colonisers to a specific periphery within which one should behave consequently and hence can't act freely. My paper will now analyse how the predetermined set of rules and regulations or discourse has ruined the lives of the two protagonists Mary and Dick Turner of Lessing's novel *The Grass Is Singing*.

Foucault, in his 'Truth and Power' interview had mentioned about three main cruxes which help the discourse to be affected in a society; those are being truth, power, and knowledge. Considering the first ingredient truth, one can surely say that a proposition is acceptable or regarded to be true until everyone believes it to be the only thing to be trusted on by leaving out other thoughts to be untrue. In contrast to *The Grass Is Singing*, we can see how the British community, though being a minor group in Southern Rhodesia, influenced themselves in every step of their life and ultimately compelling to preserve the notion and 'truth' of their superiority. Secondly, in the preservation of discourse, Foucault remarks that power is pivotal to it, hence it is always the objective of the people in power position to conserve the discourse. Now if we further analyze this thing by considering what Ania Loomba has said while discussing power by Foucault, we will find another dimension to it. Loomba says that power creates and restricts behaviour at the same time. So, if we see the condition of the Turner couple then we will prove these statements to be true as I have stated earlier that the set of rules or discourses has bound them up merely making them the puppets of the society. Lastly knowledge is Foucault's third pillar for how discourses can be embedded in a society and people in the position of power generates this knowledge and imprisons people who could ever pose a threat to the highest authority. So now in connection to Lessing's novel, the most powerful people in Southern Rhodesia- the white British colonizers, produces knowledge through the clashes occurring in between them and their subordinate black community.

We can assume that by keeping all these notions in her mind, Doris Lessing's choice of giving the protagonists of her novel, Mary and Dick, the surname 'Turner' is an apt example of irony. Actually, she had envisaged that both of them acted just opposite to what the discourse wants them to behave, as being white colonisers. Thus, in a way, they are like 'Turner's of discourse which leads to the feeling of threat amongst other white citizens of Southern Rhodesia. Moreover, considering both the characters individually we can also see that Dick is unable to concentrate on one crop in farming as if he becomes a 'Turner' from one business to another. On the other side, Mary while being unmarried and living in the city was not a threat to the white people, but after marrying Dick Turner and having daily interaction with the black natives of Southern Rhodesia, she posed a menace to the white society which ultimately shows the effect of the surname 'Turner' she had in her life.

From the very beginning to the end of the novel, Dick Turner was an absolute incompetent or failed farmer. His failure can better be analysed through a veritable contrast with another character of the novel Charlie Slatter, as he was the epitome of following all the characteristics that the discourse wants from a white coloniser. Charlie Slatter was rational,

resolute and successful in all courses in his life; hence he proves himself to be a proper colonist. As a contrast to him, Dick, first and foremost was irrational that leads him to the destruction in his financial condition and never got any way to get out of it. The difference between these two is shown by the quote that follows below where Slatter drives to the farm to meet Dick and while driving across Dick's land, he learns about its decay:

As he drove, he kept a sharp eye for signs of neglect. Things seemed neither better nor worse. The fireguards along the boundary were there, but they would protect the farm from a small, slow-burning fire, not a big one with the wind behind it. The cowsheds, while not actually falling down, had been propped up by poles, and the thatched roofs were patched like darned stockings, the grass all different colours and stages of newness, reaching untidily to the ground in untrimmed swathes. The roads needed draining: they were in a deplorable state. The big plantation of gum trees past which the road went had been burnt by a veld fire in one corner; they stood pale and spectral in the strong yellow afternoon sunlight, their leaves hanging stiffly down, their trunks charred black. (Lessing 212)

All these are nothing but signs showing how irrational Dick is that kept him in many steps behind, from being a successful personality which he always aspires to become. Though, Dick has a different relationship with the soil and land, it shows nothing but a sensible side of his character. He has a way of looking at the land in a more romantic and idealistic way: "he loved it and was part of it" and literally takes care of it. (Lessing 151) Dick has a true sense of responsibility for the soil as we can see Dick's farm has "a hundred acres of good trees" whereas Slatter's land has none. (Lessing 151)

Dick's futile quest of being a successful farmer which ultimately will get rid of the poverty-stricken condition of Mary and himself makes him irrational and with a lack of taking firm decisions with a foresight. Dick's blind pursuit of profit makes him so delusional that he cannot comprehend the fact that sticking or concentrating on a single crop would solve all his problems- something that is obvious for other characters in the novel. This was also reflected in Mary's futile endeavours in persuading Dick to give time to the growing of tobacco, something that in general was very lucrative till it's kept for more than one season. One can also analyse the fact that why Dick does not give the tobacco, time to grow, because it is his own pride coming in between him and his borrowing of capital. All these factors ultimately oppose him to make serious investments in his farming and he continues to take shortcuts in saving money.

Once again, the direct contrast to the life of Charlie Slatter, with that of Mary and Dick Turner, makes it more apt to tag them as opposites to the rest of the white society. Slatter owns a large farm, a large home, and is in such fine financial shape that he can't seem to deter himself from becoming richer. All these attributes prove the fact that he is a proper coloniser and he thoroughly maintains through everything that- black people are inferior to the whites. According to Loomba, Capitalism did rely on the ideological idea of white superiority, but it also reinforced it so that the white farmers could continue to make profit and the white man could continue to be in charge. On the other hand, the society looked at the Turners as a threat to their superiority over the blacks. One can also contrast the behaviour of the two, towards their workers; where Charlie Slatter is as hard as everyone expects him to be, Dick is too kind. Dick never forces the workers to get into a line and also gives them breaks in between works; this act of humanity is seen as a loss to the production because the workers will get lazy and will not be able to produce more. Here Dick is seen to be as a "Turner" of the imperial rhetoric, which gives the power to the white to exploit the inferior blacks. We can say that the discourse of the society and its power structure provokes Dick to invite his own doom.

Another main protagonist of Lessing's novel is Mary Turner, wife of Dick Turner; who is born and brought up in town. In the town she was in many ways an important member of the social scene and at work, she was the personal "secretary of her employer" (Lessing 43). The black people "were outside her orbit" (Lessing 42) but after marrying Dick, she becomes a part of it as she has to make interactions with them all the time. The detailed description of Mary's life in town mentioned in the novel helps the reader to see the immense contrast between her town and country life. In the farm Mary is isolated and out of place and how misplaced she is in the country is evident through her first encounter with the farm where she wears high heels and reacts strongly to the look and smell of the house. All through her married life Mary is never being able to incorporate into the white society of Rhodesia, which was in some way her own fault too as she constantly turns down the invitations sent to her to attend social functions. At the very beginning of the novel, the readers are given insight into the fact that before her married life she has a lack of contact with the black masses; moreover, "'race' meant to her... other women's servants, and the amorphous mass of natives in the streets, whom she hardly noticed." (Lessing 42) Above all, Mary cannot deal with this new situation that she is both unfamiliar and uncomfortable with.

Mary's insufficient knowledge about how to behave towards the black servants, poses an obstacle, as can be seen by her strained relation with Samson. Dick's long-time servant, Samson, has an understanding with his master regarding the allowance of taking groceries; but

Mary's interference and withdrawal leads to Samson leaving the farm. Mary's incongruity against the Africans originates from her misinterpretation of Dick's way of organising life and his way of treating his workers and servants tactfully by not driving them away. Mary lets Samson go without his share of the groceries, she lets another houseboy work without a break for dinner and she cannot see the point in giving the men working for Dick on the farm a five-minute break every hour, or even a chance to drink water. The consequence of this is that the houseboys as well as the farm workers resign, leaving Dick and Mary in a tougher financial position that creates tension and hostility between them. The resentment that is created between the husband and wife is due to Mary's inability to interact and get along with the black population, which finally leads to Mary's turning away from reality and gradually losing her mind.

It is a preconceived notion that the house of the white population has to be not only bigger in size but also be better in the style of construction. In the first chapter of the novel, Tony Marston, the would-be caretaker of the farm describes Turner's residence giving the reader an idea of its dilapidation:

He looked up at the bare crackling tin of the roof, that was warped with the sun, at the faded gimcrack furniture, at the dusty brick floors covered with ragged animal skins, and wondered how those two, Mary and Dick Turner, could have borne to live in such a place, year in year out, for so long. Why even the little thatched hut where he lived at the back was better than this! Why did they go on without even so much as putting in ceilings? (Lessing 33)

Marston ponders over the fact that how the Turner couple used to live in such a miserable condition throughout their whole lifespan? The house, lower than the level of a hut, is nothing but a threat to the other whites; representing the Turner couple as if they don't care to maintain difference between the lives of the blacks and whites. We can see that Charlie Slatter also takes part in describing the poverty-stricken condition of the Turners, as he draws reader's attention to the earrings worn by Mary and the inexpensive textile covering the couch in the Turners' living room; as both these products are originally designed for and solely sold to black people, due to its poor quality. Moreover, Dick by himself tells Charlie that he and Marry are using the goods which were not sold due to their failed business of the kaffir store. These are the few impressions created by the Turners of themselves in front of the other whites.

Apart from the above-mentioned reasons, much of the hatred directed towards Dick and Mary can be found in the fact that they have never participated in any of the social functions that are important to the white community of their district. The character of Mrs Slatter has the

function of highlighting this through the invitations to come and drink tea, play tennis or engage in some other activity that she sends Mary throughout the novel. But Mary constantly turns these invitations down, which later becomes the reason for Mrs Slatter's anger and hatred towards the Turners. Again, they are seen as 'Turner's of the discourse that attending the social events organised by the respective community is a sign of being a part of that. But the real reason for the Turners' unwillingness in attending social events of the whites is that they are very much ashamed of their miserable financial condition, but to the other white it seemed as an insult to them by not following the discourse. Society demands that they improve, but since they do not, they isolate themselves from the rest of the white community in the district.

When Mary eventually gives up on life, she commits her most glaring error, at least in the eyes of the white people. Mary allows Moses, her new houseboy, to keep hold of her. Mary has had a previous altercation with Moses, before he was named houseboy by Dick which ended up with Mary hitting Moses with a whip, something that gives their new relationship an extra dimension. Moses has a complete influence over Mary, even advising her what to do and what not to do. To validate my point, I am citing Hegel's concept of the master-servant dialectic, in which the master (lord) becomes a dependent person on the slave (bondsmen), who is an autonomous subject. Furthermore, later on, sexual violence is imposed by the indigenous servant Moses, upon his Anglo-European mistress, Mary Turner, which can be presented as an innate challenge to the white patriarch. Though there are no clear hints in the novel about a physical relationship, it was a trick by Charlie Slatter to not reveal what actually happened between Mary and Moses, simply because he wanted to prove the discourse that the black population consists of thieves and murderers. As a result of this, Mary is tagged as she has broken their biracial sexual taboos and therefore the other whites see her as a threat to the myth of their own cultural superiority. Therefore, a situation that could have been dangerous to the power structure of white supremacy has turned into a cautionary tale for other white women in Southern Rhodesia; with Mary's death only serving to document the impossibility of such relationships being started or maintained to the advantage of the whites.

The reasons why the other white people could not tolerate the Turner couple are quite simple- first and foremost is, the white population (the Turner) is not higher in the hierarchy than the black population hence they find it harder to claim their superiority and secondly, the Turners have fallen to the level of the black people, which prevents other British colonists from ending up in the same situation. Therefore, every threat, whether it is a black person not following the colour-bar or a white couple living in a standard that is too close to the black population or their situation is so miserable that they are unable to get out of it, take command

of their land as a proper colonialist should do; everything is looked down upon as a challenge thrown towards the superior whites, by not following their structured rules. Now I must conclude stating that the various discourses, and its way of controlling not only the black population but also the colonisers was making life impossible for the Turners which is reflected in great detail throughout the novel *The Grass Is Singing*. Hence, the protagonists Mary and Dick can aptly be called ‘Turner’s of the discourse, as they have thoroughly failed to become proper upholders of the white colonisers’ society, its discourse and truth which finally led to the demise of the Turners.

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