



Cross-Cultural Identity in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract:

In literature, culture is the set of values, beliefs, customs, and activities of a specific group of people at a specific time. It can also refer to the way of life for a society, including its arts, institutions, and beliefs. The people of different places have varying perceptions like identification of objects and interpretation of depth, specific rituals and customs as it is seen in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* where two people of different culture suffer from humiliation and chaos that brings a catastrophic end of the story. The crisis of identity in cross-culture environment is portrayed as a common theme in *The Grass is Singing* in the form of conflict as law aesthetics, religion, attitudes social organizations, family, community and a person's role or status among others. Because of conflict in their behaviour patterns, identity and cultural values, the people are not able to share a bond with one another and the community. Subsequently, spending long time in different culture, the eternal forms of culture are changed but the internal form does not change and because of this the crisis of identity occurs. The repressed anger and desire of living freely in the society compel the individual to go against the law as it occurs in *The Grass is Singing*. People living in different cultural settings have varying perceptions like identification of objects and interpretation of depth.

Keywords: Culture, identity, cross- cultural values, tradition, customs, beliefs, socio-culture.

The African continent has usually been mentioned from a double point of view. On the one hand, it is taken into consideration to be the cradle of all humanity and the origin of all human existence. But alternatively, on the other hand, it also seemed like the remainder of old and historical instances, in particular within the eyes of the white colonizers. In Lessing's case, it is not most effective, the land however additionally the African environment is described as dry and suffocating. The contradiction between those two representations of Africa is not most effectively obvious in the picture of the continent itself however in the portraits of the protagonists as well. In her stories, the characters belong to a group of white settlers who had set foot in Africa many generations ago. The stories of Doris Lessing did not fail to give attention to sweet and natural snapshots and the African panorama. A few descriptions like Kraal, veld, timber, bushes are the prominent words that have been utilized by Doris Lessing in all her short stories.

Culture is a cardinal detail in the stories of Doris Lessing. Culture is the manner of existence of each network, class, society, state, and country. It is a virtual term with manifold and ever-changing meanings. It is a strong link meant to both unite and segregate humans. Way of life is a very wide time period to analyse. It has a number of varieties, tendencies, and brands. A. L. Kroeber in his book, *Anthropology*, which was published in 1923, expressed that the upward thrust of the human brain gave development to the ability for tradition. Culture is closely related to the human brain. It means that lifestyle and physical progression advanced collectively and inspired each other.

Raymond Williams proposed definite subcategories into which way of life can be divided. In one of the most significant essays, *Base and Superstructure* in Marxist crucial concepts, he differentiates amongst dominant, opportunity, and oppositional cultures. As an end result, he makes it clear that tradition isn't an immutable concept. Individuality and forth between opportunity and oppositional forms are enormously sincere. It's far the difference between someone who simply finds an exceptional manner to guide life and desires to be left alone with it

and a person who unearths an exclusive manner to stay and wants to trade society in its mild. According to Raymond Williams, alternative and oppositional cultures both have to be made research and it gains new forms. Raymond Williams' work has been principally considerable for the growth and development of the theory of culture, cultural materialism, and cultural studies. Raymond Williams' well-known definition of culture and society exposes very effectively unveils and explores the concept of cultural hegemony:

Our description of our experience comes to compose a network of relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally part of our social organization since our way of seeing is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change (*What is Culture*, 55).

The definition of culture is quite essential because it exposes a few vital points about culture. Besides, it is the study of society about culture, and not only its economics or politics. It has been said that communication creates community. A society's meanings and values reproduce its economic and political systems and therefore to study meanings of culture. Culture is about the role of meaning in society. Society is the cluster of human beings and culture gives meaning to it. Both culture and meanings are always changing entities. They are never permanent. Culture and meanings are arrived at through a process of encoder and decoder. The process of meaning creation is connected to the strictures of power in society. Certain meanings obtain greater power because of their sources, other meanings become less important. When we talk about culture, we may speak of its changes and their impacts on society. But to an extent, cultural hegemony can affect a person not only physically but mentally also.

The impact of distinction between black and white, slavery, class and race are clearly shown by many writers. Doris Lessing is one of them who shown this apartheid policy in her novels.

She chose various themes in her novels. The vast area of social, personal, ethical, cultural, psychological background is clearly visible in her works. Her first novel *The Grass is Singing* written in 1950 is a proto feminist novel, since it was written well before the Women's Liberation Movement. The novel gradually unfolds the disintegration of the rational 'self' of Mary Turner, the female protagonist, due to the interplay of several external forces on one hand and Mary's insecure childhood, low self-esteem and marital inadequacy on the other. Heavily steeped in Freudian psychoanalysis, the psyche of the female protagonist is unfolded as the narrative proceeds further. The novel deals with human relations, social structures and racial prejudices in Rhodesian society. Not only does it speak against colonialism in Africa and has a feminist perspective but it also recognizes confusion and its consequence upon inner reality. The novel examines the relationship between Mary Turner and her husband Dick Turner a white farmer and her black servant named, Mosses. The novel does not unwaveringly explore the feminist causes. Still Lessing's portrayal of Mary Turner warrants a closer examination of her conflicts. Because of the unique psychological perspective Lessing unfolds the female psyche in the midst of gender, race and class barrier.

The quest for identity became a national object in modern literature. It had been the national disquiet all through the British history. The concept of identity in sociological and psychological expressions implies the unity of the individual with the community. The identity crisis is deeply related to human alienation, isolation and estrangement. The feeling of the loss of self-hood is related to identity and one's established personality. Within the marriage relationship Lessing's women in love find that, their myopically assumed conviction of superior male strength soon dissipates. The married woman hastens to create an image of her husband according to some ideal standard that will enable her to perpetuate illusion.

Lessing depicts marriage as an emotionally stifling and tyrannical institution for women. Most of her characters like Mary Turner, Martha Maisie, Marjorie, Molly, Ella, Marion and Anna are victims of gender oppression. The man-woman relationship in Lessing's fiction, although destructive in its conventional forms, can serve as a vehicle for self-knowledge. In Lessing's world women do not achieve self-fulfilment in the traditional roles of wife and mother, nor do they succeed as 'free' professional women. Their failure is dual. They do not assume responsibility for themselves, and are deeply, but wrongly fancy romantic love, the two being causally interlinked. In her first novel *The Grass is Singing* in order to fulfil a social obligation Mary desperately plunges into marriage with the first man to offer an acceptable possibility with Dick Turner. Dick and Mary Turner are matched only through their requirements, not through their emotional needs. Their sexual relationship was a disaster from the beginning. Dick unintentionally makes her a sexual object and tells her that she can accept him when he approaches her submissively. Her rejection of sexuality, marriage, motherhood and her hatred of being female are fully projected upon the black women. If she disliked native men, she loathed the women. She could not bear to see maternal black women:

Sitting there on the grass, their legs tucked
up under them in that traditional timeless pose
...peaceful and uncaring.

She did not like the way they suckled their babies, with their breasts hanging down for everyone to see, "there was something in their calm satisfied maternity that made her blood boil". The ultimate end of woman ought not be satisfied in the maternity. Mary's sexual relationship with Dick was unsatisfactory and socially reserved, and her marriage was bitterly unhappy. In order to feel loved, the woman must see herself as "feminine" or passive and the male as "masculine" or dominant. This attitude is seen in *The Grass is Singing* in which Lessing portrays Mary Turner deliberately refusing vital participation, joint work effort because:

She needed a man stronger than herself and
she was trying to create one out of Dick. If
he had genuinely ... taken the ascendancy
over her, she would have loved him,
and no longer hated herself for becoming
tied to a failure.

This is a recurrent theme in Lessing's work. Woman's desire being, her need for the illusion of having a 'real', man, a protector acting as buffer between her and reality. The only intimate relationship Mary had in her life was with the black servant Moses who slowly gained dominance over her. In the portrayal of Moses, Lessing depicts Moses exuding a sexual power that Mary unconsciously seeks. Though she assumed emotional pretensions she felt attracted towards him. Mary Turner dreamt about Moses, frightening dreams where she was forced to touch him. She also dreamt that Dick was dead, and she felt a tremendous sense of relief and guilt. Moses merged into the image of her father, who approached her lasciviously, smelling foul who put his hand on her arm and she heard a voice of an African man but at the same time she felt that it was her father menacing and horrible, who touched her in desire.

The two major themes in Doris Lessing's novels are the domination of the blacks by whites as reflected in the colonial encounters and the deplorable state of women in a patriarchal society as described. A patriarchal society is not liberal in conceding its women's segment any right. Any attempt at women's progress or giving equal rights to women shakes the foundation. Colonialism is important in defining a specific form of cultural exploitation that developed over the last four hundred years with the expansion of Europe. Colonialism is an essential concept of Doris Lessing's works. In her narration there are two settings of Africa, one, which belongs to the African country and the other, shows the supremacy of white colonialism. She belonged neither to the African country nor to Rhodesia but she was a silent observer, which

gave clarity to her detachment as an artist. When she went to London in 1949, she felt it was her home in cultural terms, but she still remained as an outsider and saw London as a strange country. Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was Doris Lessing's home for twenty-five years and her feeling for Africa has deeply influenced her work. She paints a picture of Rhodesian society where she delineates how peasants and black people were treated by their white and the black but also explores phallogocentrism and failure of individuality. Mary, the heroine of the novel, is eager to grasp her own identity due to overpowering colonial rule which is explored by Lessing in the form of violence and brutality. It also presents cross-hatched intersection of gender, class and race along with failed marriage and sexual obsession.

The aim of Doris Lessing seems to reveal how individuals, particularly women, are restricted in marriage and are liberated only when they transcend the limitations of personal roles or when they descend into madness. Lessing's narrative design corresponds to her protagonists' experience of enclosure and an attempt to escape from marriage. Marriage is never depicted as a supportive, non-restrictive or expansive relationship. Divorced, married, single, and widowed women all function independently but often revert to their original social roles as married women because they ultimately remain dependent upon men. Marriage presents not only the relationship of men and women, but defines individuals and symbolizes the way the community functions. Men's work and position in the economic and social hierarchy define them but women's relationship with men determines their function and role in society. To Lessing the rivalry and conflict between men and women in marriage are not isolated psychological or sexual problems. They reflect complex economic, political and philosophical relationships based on power and its effect on individuals and groups. Thus, marriage is a microcosm of society according to Lessing.

Jung's model proposes that the unconscious mind contains not only the contents of a non-sexual nature, as well as psychic material that; 'may never have been conscious but they are capable of entering awareness through the symbolic language of dreams. In Jungian terms, Moses had come to represent for Mary her 'Shadow' the repressed and alien side of her personality that was in opposition to those aspects, which she could acknowledge consciously. According to a critic Ruth Whittaker:

'Black' and 'White' thus take on a symbolism,
which is of course latent throughout the
novel, but which becomes increasingly more
explicit towards the end. Moses represents the
'black' hidden side of Mary's nature, and she is
terrified of his attraction for her, since this
may force her to come into contact, not just
with him, but with the dark forces of her own
personality.

The first chapter of the book focuses on this murder and the general atmosphere in the white world in Zimbabwe, where the whole action of the novel is set. The omniscient narrator takes the role of the collective consciousness, that is, the white British settlers in South Africa and the narrator reflects the opinion of these colonizers about the mysterious murder of Mary Turner. In the following chapters the point of view shifts from the collective to the individual and gets into the mind of Mary Turner and begins to narrate the life of Mary in a chronological order focusing on her unhappy childhood, and then the happy days in town, her desperate marriage at the age of thirty, coming to the village as a result of her marriage to Dick, the broken illusions of both, Mary's brutal treatment towards the natives, the economic collapse of

the couple and the sale of the farm to Charlie Slatter, her mental breakdown and lastly her murder by Moses at the end where the circular structure of the novel is completed.

Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* explores Mary's state of mood and the mental process, the landscapes, and the weathers of southern Rhodesia. Mary is an incredible creation by Lessing, a woman with avoidant attachment style, who turns from victim to venomous, from independent to weak, from sane to crazy, and from racist to tolerant one. Instead of creating intimacy, Mary Turner is so vary of intimacy. She always tries to avoid emotional connection with others. The local newspaper does not say much, but the news gets sensational among the natives and whites. The influence of childhood upon individual life is evidence in psychoanalysis. Sofian Herouach observes that Mary's "childhood had strong impact on her mother personality. Her conflicting relationship with the society and the contradictory feelings she manifests can be interpreted as a product of her opened suffering childhood" (162). In her childhood, Mary hated her inattentive and aggressive parents. She hated the way that her father taking liquor and his behaviour and hated her mother for her shrill voice. Her mother was a passive and helpless woman dominated by the overwhelming masculine patterns, nonetheless, the complying victim of poverty. Mary was sent to a boarding school in a dusty village. She really enjoyed the loneliness that she felt happy being separated from her parents and spent the school days happily in a village boarding school. After having separated from her parents, she visited the home occasionally. As a young girl, she felt uncomfortable with her parents, because they did not live up to her expectations and were always quarrelsome parents.

Mary completed her school education at the age of sixteen. She took a job of typing, shorthand and book-keeping in an office in town. She enjoyed her adulthood in the clubhouse. She did not want to visit her parents. She did not want to talk to them. Mary's mother died when Mary was twenty. Her father was now hundred miles away because he had been transferred to another place. She was left alone but was happy to get rid of her father. Lessing describes Mary's

feelings, “she seemed to be avenging her mother’s suffering” (35). By the time she was twenty-five her father died. She did not find anything to connect her with her unhappy and gloomy house. She was free.

When Mary thought of ‘home’ she remembered a wooden box
shaken by passing trains . . . Mary liked other people’s children
but shuddered at the thought having any of her own. She
felt sentimental at weddings, but she had profound distaste for
sex; there had been little privacy in her home and there were
things she did not care to remember; she had taken good care
to forget them years ago. (39)

In every occasion of the present, Mary compares her past relationships with her parents. Even her parents’ death won’t affect her daily life at the clubhouse. She enjoyed her twenties and thirties living a care free life of a single woman. She had some boyfriends, went to movies, and played games with them.

When Mary’s thirtieth birthday came, she became the personal secretary of her employer. Her promotion helped her earn good amount of money. But she lived in a girl’s club, opened to help poor women” (44). Most of her friends got married and she had been bride’s maid many times. Lessing indicates Mary’s avoidant attachment style at the remembrance of her childhood, “when she thought of marriage, she remembered her father coming home with red-eyed and fuddled; when she thought of children she saw her mother’s face at her children’s funeral – anguished, but as dry and as hard as rock....” (39). Thus, till the age of thirty she remained unmarried because as Neena Arora puts it, “the unhappy memories of her childhood and miseries of her mother flash before her eyes, every time she thought of marriage” (75).

Marriage is to be the only final future for women is the general notion of the prevailing patriarchal society. Mary is also forced into marriage by the pressure of her social circle. She

exemplifies the broad social and cultural forces which insist that women live only in the terms of marriage. The feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir says in her *The Second Sex* that women have no choice but to be married soon to escape from social criticism. —A girl's free choice was always highly restricted; and celibacy except in rare cases where it bears a sacred connotation ranked her as a parasite and pariah; the marriage was her only means of survival and the only justification of her existence.

Moses displays a different kind of weakness. He reveals physical and emotional power over her but fails against his racial, economic and political identity. The pressure of the society makes Mary fall into the miserable marriage and consequently accepts the economic status of her husband. The description of Mary's early life does not show any colour conflict in her life, but after the marriage, her direct contact with the natives disturbs her life. She becomes a victim of the colonial conflict to decide between cruelty and humanity. She has been brought up in a small house without any connection with black person but all the conflict and chaos of different place is faced by her after she got married. It is too late when she recognises her mistake of marriage, repressed sexuality and her inhuman behaviour. Moses stands as a representative of both the blacks and the patriarchal society. He kills Mary to take revenge on the whites as well as the female sex. Lessing has described by writing this novel how a poor white like Dick has to struggle in his life because of the lack of money, power and success. Just like Mary and Moses, he has no identity of his own as he is not able to conform to his social, gender, racial and class identity.

Mary has lived a poor life in the past and she has a great fear of becoming like her mother, who has lived in poverty with her drunken husband until her death. Mary has suppressed her agonising memories as they give her only pain. However, she has no control over her feelings being exploded when she enters into a weaker and emotional situation. She has the only aim to lead a life completely opposite to the life of her mother but she is not able to achieve it. Mary

could not forget her friends' gossips about her asexuality and childish behaviour, which has brought about her unfortunate marriage. It would have been better if only she has stayed in the town as an unmarried woman and has lived her life on her own, independently of others. Eventually, she regrets everything and feels helpless.

Lessing clearly portrays Mary in the novel as a non-native woman of Southern Rhodesia. She does not want in any way to adjust to the life style of Dick and his farm. In the novel, the whites have the economic and political power, but the blacks are always at the edge of life in most of the aspects and those aspects are well portrayed by Lessing's memories in the novel. The novel records Mary's total failure to survive on the levels of the self, society and racialism. Moreover, the novel also reveals a social message that the native black society in Rhodesia never forgets to take revenge. The readers also condemn Mary for getting killed at the hands of a servant. The white society in Rhodesia files a case and investigation against Moses and hangs him of murder. It is no exaggeration to say that the entire novel is sprinkled by the cultural memories of the writer. At the same time it also strongly underlines the fact that Doris Lessing is a human being with utmost humane quality. Although being a white, she does not hesitate in the least manner to pinpoint the atrocities of the whites over the blacks. The greenery and wilderness of Dick's farm projects her aesthetic sense of mother nature.

Mary's character is affected by the pressure of her mother, society and the family. The novel discusses about the colonial life and focuses on the individual character Mary, a stereotype white society African woman with personal and social vulnerabilities of pressure on her. She lives in the city, and moves to the colonial village of Ngesi. She has the problem to understand the system of farm life in the village. After the marriage she behaves violently while living with Dick on the farm; however, her marital life is not good. She rejects the invitations for social events from Charlie's wife. Mary has totally misunderstood the system of farm life. She always

thinks in her mind about the city life and her desire to leave the farm. She walks up and down in the darkness of the busy surroundings.

Lessing identifies the figurative elements which she has crossed over in her life. They are represented in her novels as the symbols and they are store (Kaffir Store), the veranda and tobacco. She does not refer to any one store in particular, but fairly a kind of stores is found all over Southern Rhodesia. The white families purchase groceries, cosmetics, clothes and tools from the store and it is very useful for the white people to pick up mail from the store. Generally, a bar is also attached where men like Mary's father drink and spend their time. The store contains the consumer goods and mails; it serves as a symbolic connection to England, the mother land for white South Africans like Mary's parents.

The novel depicts the ambivalent relationships to one another. There are feelings of both intimacy and hard heartedness between the characters. A remarkable relationship is found between Mary and Moses. Mary has severe racist feeling with a cruel attitude towards the black people. She treats her farm servants in a horrible manner. Her antagonism towards Moses is well projected when she continuously gives household work to him without any rest and also insults him constantly. At the end of the novel Mary becomes fascinated by Moses but she does not allow herself to be openly known about it and it is indeed a feeling of infatuation. Finally, it is revealed that she has been asking him to help her comb her hair and assist in dressing. At end of the novel both this intense intimacy and hatred reach an explosive climax in which Moses kills Mary.

Lessing expresses her negative attitude of the colonial Rhodesia and the kind of oppression of personal liberty, marital failure, financial crisis, race, isolation, environment of thatched house. She resembles the chief character of Mary and both of them suffer the feelings of lost identities. This is very evident when Lessing talks about the role of women in white settler societies; Mary represents the wife of a white settler. She has been experiencing the feeling of loneliness

throughout her married life and this isolation has indeed created her non-involvement in family life. Her failure in life leads to a painful and fatal end.

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