

Perspectives on Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*: A Postcolonial Reading

Md Shams Tabrez

Research Scholar

University Department of English

T M Bhagalpur University,

Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

Abstract

This paper presents and interprets the study of Doris Lessing's novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950) with a theoretical support of the postcolonialism. It reflects a strong psychological study about a frustrated woman and her marital relationship with Dick Turner. Lessing paints a picture of Rhodesian society where she delineates how peasants and black people were treated by their white masters during that 1940s. It does not only focuses on political relationship between the white and the black but also explores phallogocentricism and failure of individuality. It also examines contact zone between Mary Turner, a white farmer's wife and her black African servant where two different cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other. It aims that Mary as the heroine of the novel grasping 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 obsessions.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Phallogocentricism, Cross-hatched, Rhodesian

Introduction

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) a British writer who was the recipient of the 2007 Nobel Prize for literature and the citation described her as that “epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny”. She takes the title of the novel from T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* which blends antique myths and representation of contemporary society. This title is included in these lines:

In this decayed hole among the mountains

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

In the faint moonlight, **the grass is singing**
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm

In the first novel of Doris Lessing we find juxtaposition between the romantic connotation of the title and the dreary sense. Ruth Whittaker says about “an extraordinary first novel in its assured treatment of its unusual subject matter.... Doris Lessing questions the entire values of Rhodesian white colonial society.” This novel reflects colonialism in the South Africa as well as sexual and political prejudice in the life of Mary Turner, a white landowner's wife, and her relation with a black African boy Moses who is also her servant.

By all accounts, it appears to be an individual and mental depiction of a female hero from adolescence to death yet observed in general, it is the political presentation of the pointlessness and delicacy of the patriarchal and colonial society whereupon the manliness of government has continued itself. The entire novel can be viewed as Mary's battle towards individuation to safeguard her genuineness and feeling of self however it fails in light of the mental and political powers which outfit her little understanding into her condition and threaten to smash her. This paper examines in full length that how Lessing depicts Mary's subjectivity as formed and trap inside the ideological triangle of gender, class and race; and how the equivalent sexual and ideological elements, rooted in family and culture, causes disappointment in Mary's accomplishing her own feeling of self and dooms her to death. Mary is divided between two conflicting status: from one perspective she yearns to be a subject of her life, to live in a way she wants, and then again she unwittingly plays out a role as an object of the white harsh structure of a colonial society which concentrates meaning of her personal self and forces its qualities, constraining the person to yield the benefit of the system. Mary's subjectivity and her personal conduct standards are formed by the cross-hatched convergence of race, class and gender through the activity of political expansionism as well as sexual with regards to colonialism.

Subjectivity within Ideological Triangle: Race, Gender and Class

The early outline of Mary's characterisation implies subjectivity treated between gender and class status. The beginning life span of Mary is shaped under the influence of a tyrannical father who wastes his money on drink in spite of his family who is suffering from both misery and poverty. Her mother an unhealthy tall and bony and always tries to boost up Mary over sewing and miserable condition, Lessing tries to point out Mary gender role as a passive and helpless woman, ruled by the overpowering masculine patterns. Mary share her agony of poverty and suffering " a small house where she is living like a small wooden box on slits" where she saw her father who always dominate to her mother and always quarrel going over money. She also witness of sexual individuality where her father was male as a coloniser, as a phallus taking advantage of logocentrism used her mother body and colonised her. All in her span Mary having a fear of sexuality as a Sigmund Freud says about "penis envy", she tries to forget whatever her past memories where her father dominate to her mother. As a subaltern she became depressed by seeing the condition of her mother as a feminine victim, after marriage her mother miserable condition arises due to which Mary got negative impact of feminist in the form of sexual repression.

After Mary's mother death she wants to escape from tragic repetition, at the age of 16 she finds a job as a secretary and spending her life lonely. After her father's death little bit relief comes in her life, trying to forget her traumatic memory. Now, she feels like girl and joins a girl club living freely, putting fashionable dresses being bold. She seems "in some way to be avenging her mother's sufferings" and to cut herself from her past (p.35). When she joins girls club then she not considers on her weakness, aloofness, shyness and she became more conscious on her goal and work. In girls club daily she encounter with men but she does not want to go close to any fellow because whenever she memories her memory, she remembers " a wooden box shaking by passing trains" but in club her man friends treat her as a friend. Whenever she thinks about children and marriage she goes in agony and memories her past when her father comes home with red-eyed and beat her mother very brutally then she makes her step back. Mary not having any type of marriage desire but she is also in the circle of society where she got "steel-solid strain to get married." Mary is not like her mother who depends on man emotionally as well as economically, she does not want to sustain her

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

desire what her mother did. She finds it “impossible to fit together what she was offered.” Various ups and down facing by Mary one day came she has to choose her life partner, that’s why she decides whoever comes in her way she will marry him. Dick Turner was that fellow whom Mary meets and gave her hand and she accepted by Turner. After marriage Mary got new identity in society as a wife landowner’s wife. Like other woman Mary marriage is also based on patriarchal culture where the role of women to perform and preserver her body and soul from the male domination phallus.

According to narrator Dick became fade up with his loneliness that’s why he decide to get marry, he thinks “essential for him to love somebody” (p.48) and thinking to have wife and children. When Dick saw first time to Mary is in a pole of light tumble from some place and her bend of check and a stack of a fairish flashing hair. After seeing Mary he cannot imagine this ordinary girl in trousers with the same image he see earlier. Dick Turner whose way of thinking based on old fashioned style by seeing Mary who put on trouser not consider her a feminine. Dick is thinking he can change Mary who needs only few weeks on the farm and how he conduct Mary will follow his instruction. She is chosen as a sex-object where Dick uses to gaze all the time reason is that he wants to escape from loneliness, whatever the desire of Dick which recall the old story of the sex-economic rules. After getting married Mary play a gender role as a practical serene person, she also feels unconscious as her mother and bound with cultural norms. Dick and Mary marriage is not based on mutual understanding or Platonic love but based on exploitation, self-delusion and try to make each other satisfy with their body but not with soul.

It was the first night when Mary entered in new life, new home with new man but condition was as same as old and miserable as in past. She wants to surpass her gender subjectivity and escaper from her class but seeing the condition of Dick’s house ‘a small stuffy shelter, the greasy lamp, the bare brick floor.’ After seeing all the circumstances in Dick’s home she feels weak and disappointed, she is thinking that her father from his grave sent Dick to act like him whatever the act done by him in previous days to her mother. The narrator links gender and poverty to analyse Mary’s new situation, she always wants to escape from poverty but its ill-matched marriage and same issue of poverty is still continued.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

Mary realises that from the first moment when she enters in Dick's like her marriage is failure. Dick is failure at farming that's why she spurn him, she also sees Dick is weak and looser on the other hand "Jonah" is more capable at farming. Mary feels them both of them destroying due to stinting poverty of Dick and him also having lack of financial self interest, that's why Mary wants to escape from such circumstances. Once there is an argument over money, she finds herself that she is speaking in a new voice as same as her mother speaks in front of her father, here narrator notice that it is "not the voice of Mary, the individual, but the voice of the suffering female..."(p.79) which is governed by Phallogentric thoughts. Dick is such a poor fellow that he cannot afford a ceiling in his house and the sun heat directly came to their house and Mary is compelled to spend her all day inside the direct heat. "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well" (Virginia Woolf) such a condition became here of Mary Turner.

Mary while living in a small destitute farm and the miserable condition of house facing suffocation heats "like an enemy" which is her compulsion and also facing daily quarrel over money. By seeing all condition Mary became fade up she is thinking there is no any future for both of them and environment is also not suitable for her to work in a farm. She might be thinking that she will resume her life once again that's why she left Dick house and returns to the town. When she came back to her town very soon she realises that her old and dirty shoes red with dust and not getting admitted into the girl's club where she used to work earlier, reason is that she is now married and also having dearth of money to dress her hair and to paid hotel bill. With a day when Dick came to collect her she sees no other way than dimness and compliance she is feeling "innumerable humiliation and obstacles" (p.101). Here narrator goes to revels connection of Mary's gender role and her class in this scene when she is dependable on Dick. Mary is facing a lot of hurdle and to breakdown all obstacle she is need of money and courage. As Virginia Woolf says "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Mary needs psychologically as well as economically support in her present situation. But here the condition is that she is lacking both economic power and psychological support and the dearth of money makes her hollow day by day. Mary is realising and giving a message that "the ladies who wed men like Dick adapt at some point or another that there are two things they can do: they can make

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

themselves frantic, destroy themselves in tempests of useless outrage and resistance; or they can hold themselves tight and go severe.” Mary feels that she not having such a power internally as well as external that she can argue with Dick, for her, “would have been like arguing with destiny itself” (p.94).

Turner has been reveal by narrator that at farming and due to his poverty he is disliked by society in the district and he likes secluded. The Turner’s elementary condition of life is bothersome for other white people because they never think that the natives live here a comfortable life as whites are living that’s why they hate natives and Turner too. In this way the anxiety is more economic and political way based on the opposition of the black/white. Apart from gender and class clash we may also see a complex clash of value system, which adds to narrative structure and known as the matter of race. According to Jean Pickering where she analysed about this novel *The Grass is Singing*, and summaries three issue of race gender and class in this African colonial setting: “Although the white settlers grew up in a class society... the class attitudes of the collective have simplified into consideration of us, the Whites, and then, the Blacks. But there is another value system that complicates the issue. In white settler society man outrank women even more than they do at “home” in middle-class England (19).

White men’s spirit of venture is based on Colonialism for farm and missionary life its settlement in the third world countries and their resources are established by the native people. Native men are enslaved by the White men and their lands are also stolen by White men master in the centre and preserve their status and see natives as “Others” their privilege of power in colonised gradation they use two inseparable qualifiers i.e. race and gender. The major components of hierarchy for white settlers and intruder are gender and race sexism and racism through which they want to established their own rules and regulation in the alien land.

White/black binary reminds us a race difference which is linked up especially gender. As a phallus the white men govern the white women and use as unattainable property as well as deed of native men brutal, violent and do sexual threatening to innocence white women. The strategies of savage and sexual threatening taken as individuality from white women and

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

colonise them as a sexual objects which is always in hazard and in need of heroic protection by their white men, and white men overcome their dread and green eyed monster for the dignified sexual potency of the black men. The White Culture effective projects “all of those qualities and characteristics which it most fears and hates within itself” on the natives which creates for the subordinate group “a wholly negative cultural identity” (Walsh). In the same way Jan Mohamed points out: “the native is cast as no more than a recipient of the negative elements of the self that the European projects onto him” (85). White man’s used white woman as a property and symbol of his power and “forbidden fruit” on the other hand black man thinks about black woman that they are unable to handle the black labours. That’s why white women are instructing that they cannot share their physical strength with white men particularly in the farm because it shows the context of masculinity work. A woman is considering here in this novel “fenced in the domestic sphere.” One of the powerful farmers Charlie Slater, who lives in the same district, makes a joke that: “Needs a man to deal with niggers. Niggers don’t understand women giving them orders. They keep their own women in their right places.” (p.23)

It is the fact that in such colonial sermon the black natives either do indigent agricultural worker or employed as a domestic servant in feminine sphere, black men also represent as cruel, violent, wild, potential rapist and threat the white women. That’s why white men protect their white women from black natives due to this white patriarchy makes a heroic scenario or themselves. Here in this novel we see sexual politics about the colonial myth and the white women has been victimize due to native subjects and their sexual and racial politics.

Disappointment of Mary’s Individuation

In this novel we see Mary’s victory is her awareness of the emergence of her pent up sexuality, she disproves the sexual drought that’s why her friend make poke fun to her. She can perceive herself and her sexuality not through her marriage but instead through her sexual relationship with Moses which shows her genuine self. As referenced beforehand, Moses addresses the shadow of Mary’s character, her controlled sexuality. Nevertheless, this triumph of shadow-confrontation, which is a major stage in Jungian technique of

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

individuation, is not adequate to satisfy her individuation. She is fit at long last to confront the obfuscated side inside symbolised through Moses, yet as a ladies as yet living in a pioneer and man centric setting she cannot get dominance more than two significant digressive hindrance: sexual orientation and race. Neither the issue of race nor that of sex can be exposed to the following: Mary is a white lady who is overwhelmed by Moses manliness and persecuted by her man centric culture and Moses is a dark man with unrivaled manliness however racial mediocre and mistreated. In fact, both of them are persecuted in the predominant white male English culture. Exactly when seen by the white man Tony, in spite of all that she needs from him to come and spare her from this circumstance.

Mary tries to ensure a sentiment of self against the trading off mental and physical forces; she can recognise the “evil” as her very own shadow, as absence of worry for and abuse of “Others” in her last revelation. On the last day, disillusioned with happening to any guardian angels, she comprehends that she should assume the liability for the state of her reality and finds that what is undermining “out there” is inside her own. She can overcome her psychological barriers in her progress towards self-definition, but not the stronger cultural ones. She cannot act since she is so far the prisoner of the social duty as the counterfeit reason of white advancement, as the second epigraph of the novel demonstrates: “It is by the disappointments and loners of a human progress that one can best pass judgment on its shortcoming.” Therefore, Mary’s disappointment of individuation is individual which is exceptionally political.

Conclusion: An Accidental Valiant Lady

Mary Turner cannot understand her vey own character since her character irritated by the staggering pioneer and sexual direction stories in which she is sew. The colonial ruling power directs that she as an individual needs to carry on as indicated by terms forced by her supreme character. In fact, even her separating must be quitted because it threatens the whole master of the common class. Mary flops in her experience of self-venture anyway she is the fearless lady of this novel since her switch the social, racial and social request of her general public however unwittingly. According to Katherine Fishburn’s she is an “accidental rebel” who in any event breaks down the dichotomous requests and subsequently uncovers for the

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

reader the dread and misrepresentation of the white human progress whose prosecution is the division between advantaged white and the seized black. By her demise, Mary makes ready for the neighbourhood to make a subject move. She cannot promise her very own identity since she does not have own character since she does not have any antidotes to loneliness, poverty and gender limitations, however she foretell and adjustment in Imperial attitudes. *The Grass is Singing*, through its round portrayal from an aggregate point of view of Mary's homicide to an individual record of her own life, finishes a prosecution of its focal character's life in the centre of a closed white colonial society in Southern Africa where in the connection talks of race, class and gender bring her into isolation, exclusion, separate, lastly to death. Mary's disappointment of individuation is the disappointment of patriarchy and colonial culture to fulfill its female member to discover satisfaction inside existing conditions.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

Works Cited

- Fishburn, Katherine. "The Manichean Allegories of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*",
Research in African Literature, Vol.25, No.4, Winter 1994.
- Mohamed, Abdul Jan. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Differences in Colonial Literature" in *Race, Writing, and Differences*. Ed. Henry Luis Gates. University of Chicago, 1985.
- Pickering, Jean. *Understanding Doris Lessing*. University of Southern Caroline Press, 1990.
- Walsh, Judith. *Growing Up in British India*. Holmes & Meier, 1983.
- Whittaker, Ruth. *Doris Lessing*. Macmillan, 1988.