

Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

Doris Lessing, one of the impressive feminist writers, was born in Iran to British parents in 1919. The title of her first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) is taken from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This novel has the story about hate, disgrace, and vengeance, a story about lost satisfaction. It shows the relationship between Mary Turner- a white farmer's wife and her black servant. The novel describes the various account of the social life and throws light on the racial politics between the whites and the blacks. This research paper is an endeavor to understand the novel from critical point of view.

Key words: race, feminist, white, black.

Introduction:

Doris Lessing is one of the popular and prestigious figures in the second half of the 20th century. Her work is translated into many languages. In 1949, Lessing reached to London with her son and with the manuscript of *The Grass is Singing*. The novel is published in 1950 and it becomes popular throughout. The name of this great novel was taken from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This title is consisted in these lines

In this decayed hole among the mountains
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 (Eliot. 1971, p. 385 to 390)

The Grass is Singing: a Study

The Grass is Singing is her first and tragic novel. This novel was published in 1950. It has got a tremendous success all over in the world. This novel has focused the racism between White and Blacks. The commencement of the novel takes place with news in the newspaper in which there is a murder of a white lady called Mary Turner, the wife of Richard Dick Turner, a farmer in Southern Rhodesia is shown. In this matter, a black houseboy was arrested who confessed the crime. A part of the novel is related with the enquiry of the murder by the neighbors and officers. The most of the part of the novel focuses the story of Mary, her childhood, her life in town, her affair, her marriage with Dick Turner, her behavior with the workers, her relationship with the black houseboy Moses, the Slatters, Tony Marston and at last her murder In relation to the writing of Doris Lessing, Lynda Scott writes, 'Lessing uses symbolic images of rooms to illustrate the

limitations that individuals, particularly women, experience because of the patriarchal collective, in both *To Room Nineteen* and *The Grass is Singing*.' (Scott. 1988, p. 1)

The novel is considered as a deeply autobiographical novel and based on her experiences while her stay in Africa. In this novel, she has focused the racial inequality, the conflict between outer and inner self's of the individuals. The theme of the novel *The Grass is Singing* deals with a girl called Mary. Mary is happy in her life with her job and single life. One day when she is thirty years, she comes to know the comment from her friends that she can't marry as she is lacking something. Due to this reason, she becomes resentful and decides to marry. Instead of her disinterest in the thing like marriage, she has to select Dick, a farmer as her husband. Being herself found in poor family, now it was difficult on her part to cope up with the things in the house. The relations between husband and wife were worsening day after day. Dick has denied for a child in the family due to his poor condition. Slowly Mary becomes isolated in her farm house and cut off her friends too. To get rid of this, she decided to live like past life, tried to get job in the city but all these efforts on her part are vain. She returns back humiliated from the city.

All these things now become habitual to her and without any complaint this was going in her family. One day Dick falls sick and she has to go to look towards field and labors appointed by Dick. She started to give ill treatments to all the labors on the work. She hates the people. The feministic instinct in her quietly get aroused, as a result, she dominates the poor niggers. She starts to believe that the White people should masters and the blacks should be slaves. One day she whipped a worker named Moses in such a way that a scar appear on his face. She started to believe that she is superior and she is master of workers. She disgusts all of them and behave animal like. She started to exploit the workers by increasing their work and reducing their wages.

As the days passed, her own condition starts to deteriorate; she starts to lose mental peace and therefore stays at home. Without the willingness of Moses, one of niggers, he was appointed as a maid servant to take care of Mary by Dick. For each and every task, Mary is now depended on Moses including her wearing dress. Gradually, both Dick and Mary are seen weak and their condition deteriorates. Frequently Mary goes from depression, it even arouses her weakness more and she started to rely wholly on Moses. One day slatter, their neighbor visits the family and gets astonished by watching Mary's behavior with Moses. Slatter dislikes this and announced that Mary should not be allowed to live with the worker like Moses. Slatter starts to consider himself to be the representative of White community and convincing himself that he defends the values of White culture. Somehow Slatter convinces Dick to go on a vacation with his wife for a change and also suggested, this will improve their health problem. Slatter then appoints Tony to Take care of the farm. One day Tony becomes surprised when he saw Moses was dressing Mary and thought that Mary is trying to break color bar. At last the novel ends with the murder of Mary by Moses. After committing crime, Moses waits for

the police instead of running away. By the murder of Mary, Moses has shown to the dominating society that someone always stands to resist the oppressive society.

The unhappy end of the novel is the result of isolation, alienation, mental and economic imbalance of the main characters that is Mary. In the past life she was very happy but sudden change in her character is the result of the factors mentioned above. The story of the novel is very simple. As far as the character of Moses is concerned, he is presented as a representative of the patriarchal society. In the course of time and in Mary's company he becomes so courageous that he started Mary calling 'Madame' instead of 'Missus'. Even, without any hesitation he starts to touch her.

He put out his hand reluctantly, loathes touching her, the sacrosanct white woman, and pushed her by shoulder; she felt her gently propelled across the room towards the bedroom. It was like a nightmare where one is powerless against horror: the touch of this black man's hand on her shoulder filled her with nausea; she had never, not once in her whole life, touched the flesh of a native (Lessing. 1950, p. 86)

The relationship between Moses and Mary changes and it becomes extremely nasty. Dick, Charlie and Tony also get aware of the arrogant behavior of Moses. Tony even suspects that there might be possibility of violence in the coming future. After the murder, Moses doesn't escapes from there, he ponders Mary's body

And this was his final moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent... Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his compounded with satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say (Ibid. p. 255-56)

At last Moses becomes successful in taking revenge, though he has selected a female member instead of male member for his revenge. Throughout the life of Mary remains isolated and alienated. This sense of isolation created the feeling of non-involvement in her. Mary accepted Dick as her husband without knowing him much. The childhood days of Mary were not happy. She experienced disturbing childhood due to her drunkard father, who used to torture her mother. She was aloof from homely affections. She studied in boarding school. She was in thirties when she overhears the discussion of her friends about the marriage and age. The words like "something missing somewhere" (Ibid, p. 34). The tension of leading a single woman started here and this incident has a great impact on her life. In this way, without any thinking and in haste, she accepted the proposal of a widower of fifty five. As a result, two human beings having different backgrounds come together. To regain the happiness, she tries a lot but fails. She could not regain her job. She started to behave and follow the footsteps of her mother in terms of feminism.

The woman who marries Dick learns sooner or later that there are two things they can do: they can drive themselves mad, tear themselves into pieces in storms of futile anger and rebellion; or they can hold themselves tight and go bitter. Mary with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable (Ibid, p.110)

It is quite clear from above lines that she started to feel isolated and lonely. To get relief from loneliness, she gave idea of a child to Dick but he denied it on account of poverty. Even sex could not bring Dick and Mary closer as Dick makes her sexual object by idealizing her, Mary can only accept him when he approaches her submissively. For Mary, if her connections and those just about “hadn’t made her get married, Mary would have pursued her comfortable, independent stereotypical female secretarial role” (Batra, 2008:119) Then yielding to him in a martyr-like way, ‘expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing. She was able maternally to bestow the gift of herself on this humble stranger and remain untouched” (Ibid, p. 57) Mary tries to adjust herself and finds the meaning of life by sewing, stitching and mending. Lessing has focused the theme of unsuccessful marriage and the main reason behind everything in the novel is discrimination of race.

The novel is written from the third person’s point of view. The novel is a superb creation of Lessing. The very commencement of the novel is with mystery that is murder. It arouses curiosity among the readers. Later on Lessing has given minute explanation of the relations, incidents related to murder. The plot of the novel is so composite that it becomes one of the fine creations and worthy to achieve Nobel Prize even though it is her debut novel. The female protagonists of Lessing are always shown in confusion. They are shown helpless yet they adjust and make compromise with the surrounding. In this way Mary is no exception. Doris Lessing is female writer and brings the problem of women like conflict in marriage, love and alienation of a single career woman into limelight. At the same time it is noteworthy to say that her female characters are meritorious, intelligent and have integrity. Lessing has no doubt given strong voice to Mary in the novel. Mary’s inner conflict is shown and put forth before readers in a very simple manner. Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* is no less feministic novel. It is an effective story of woman struggling and searching her personal and political identity in which the themes like sexual betrayal, the arguments in family and friendship is shown. In each respect the novels are feministic.

In Lessing’s era, woman has given subordinate position. Her role was not a major role in the family. Her duty was to rear the children, take care of farm and feed the family members. Some of the women used to go outside for other works just for supplement income for the family. The condition of Black as well as White women was no different. In the course of time many women search the option to go to nearer towns in search of work and earn wages. In towns the condition of women was somewhat different. They tried to be independent and also became politically aware. Including all these things, there were still many challenges which the women were facing in twentieth century Africa. All these aspects are described by Lessing in detail and minutely in her all works. *The Grass is Singing* is no exception to this. The psychological isolation of Mary after her marriage, her alienation, isolation is a major part of the novel. Mary is shown unhappy after being married. Actually marriage should bring happiness in the lives of the couple but in the matter of Mary it proves failure. It was a marriage for adjustment on the sides of both. The marriage was just a punishment for them. Race discrimination also plays a important role in the novel. There was gulf between Blacks and Whites, in the

course of time instead of narrowing the gulf widens. The White people treated Blacks inhumanly. Charlie Slatter murdered his one laborer and just live free by giving thirty pounds fine. Moses also suffered a lot, till the time of revenge comes. The central character and female protagonist Mary hates these Black people including Moses. By the murder of Mary, Moses feels relieved and enjoys personal victory. In this way the novel is a mixture of many themes.

In this way in her whole life Mary seems to be bodiless. In the end he becomes only a thought to Mary. In short, according to Bahlaq, “Mary believes that a woman would normally suffer from the male power in society, even though she admits that she herself does not face this oppression” (Yousef Bahlaq, 2011: 82)

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