

Madness and Mayhem: Repression, Sexuality and Madness in *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract

The Grass is Singing is considered one of the best works of Doris Lessing, often being described as one of the most powerful first novels ever written. The novel, which was published in 1950, continues to be a site of interest till date. The present paper examines the breakdown of its protagonist Mary Turner whose gradual demise into an abyss of madness becomes the pivotal point of the text. The paper argues using some of the ideas of Sigmund Freud that the major cause of Mary's downfall is her repressed sexuality and trauma that she suffered at a young age.

Keywords: madness, breakdown, repression, projection, sexuality, Doris Lessing, Sigmund Freud

The concept and idea of madness has always fascinated Lessing, and one can see its emergence in her writings from her very first novel *The Grass is Singing*. It would, however, be incorrect to state that Lessing was interested only in the idea of madness or breakdown. Her greater interest lay not in madness itself but in madness as constructed, perceived and treated by society. The attitude to madness has been different in different societies. This attitude to madness and the insane can be seen reflected in the literature of different periods. After the Renaissance artists, while the Augustans “generally did not seek to don the mantle of madness” (Porter 80), the Romantics held the ideal of “the heroic, healthy genius” (81). But this was changed in the modern era, especially that of the avant-garde where it was “held that true art . . . sprang from the morbid and pathological” (81). This was also the time of popularity of Freud and his theories which also helped in providing momentum to this idea. *The Grass is Singing* constructs madness as something pathological, something that happens when the repressed, the forgotten resurfaces in such a way that it becomes difficult for the protagonist to deal with it.

In *The Grass is Singing* Lessing describes the gradual demise of Mary, the novel's protagonist, into a state of psychological breakdown. By the time the novel reaches its end,

Mary has gone past any efforts her husband Dick decides to make in order to restore her to normalcy by leaving the farm and going away for some time. Though Mary's descent into breakdown starts manifesting itself somewhere towards the latter half of the novel, the latent psychological pressures that result in her dreadful state by the end are present and hinted at by Lessing right from the beginning of the novel. The novel, which begins with the murder of a white woman Mary Turner at the hands of her houseboy Moses, who happens to be a native African traces the story of this killing, along with her gradual demise into madness. Mary's breakdown, which start somewhere in the middle of the story, is complete by the time the reader reaches the last chapter, where she is murdered by Moses.

The major cause of Mary's breakdown is "her inability to acknowledge her body" (Grogan 36). Mary has a tendency to repress her sexuality and sexual instincts right from the beginning of the novel. The roots of this tendency to avoid and deny her sexuality and her body can be traced back to her childhood, which is like a nightmare or a trauma to her that she has kept under wraps and she avoids facing it instead of trying to come to terms with it. Her childhood consists entirely of "things she did not care to remember" (Lessing 39). The things include the poverty of her home as a child and her mother's constant complaints against her father which make Mary hate her father from an early age. But the worst memory from her childhood is that of a hide-and-seek game that she played with her father and which she hated due to its covert sexual overtones. It is this repressed memory of the game that comes to haunt her again years after she has broken off all relations from her past and after her parents are both dead, in the form of a dream where, "Her father caught her head and held it in his lap with his small hairy hands. . . . She smelled the sickly odour of beer, and through it she smelt too – her head held down in the thick stuff of his trousers – the unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him" (Lessing 163).

In her essay "Impurity, Danger and the Body in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*", Bridget Grogan writes that:

Indeed, Mary's fundamental reason for splitting her consciousness from her body can be traced back to the horror she has felt in relation to her father's sexuality. Her constituting trauma is the repressed memory of a game of hide-and-seek gone horribly awry when playful thrill turns into grotesque sexual excitement. (37)

This trauma that Mary suffers in her childhood becomes a key factor in driving her actions and shaping her personality throughout her life. As a result of her discomfiture with her body and her inability to accept her sexuality as normal, she tries to repress these aspects of her life by never acknowledging to herself that she has grown up and is now a woman. She does this by staying at a girls' club even as most of her contemporaries get married and by wearing

clothes that are like that of a woman younger than her age. Her friendships with men are also on a platonic level since the idea of physical contact is not pleasing to her.

Freud used the term 'repression' to describe every type of blockage of ideas and feelings, and equated it with the generic term 'defence' (Jacobs 41). The repressed however, does not remain repressed forever and has a great chance of entering consciousness, something called the "return of the repressed". This repression and the return of the repressed can be seen at work in the case of Mary Turner. Though Mary feels that she has taken good care to forget her experiences at her home, according to Freud's theory, those memories are only repressed in her psyche. In this sense, Mary represses the memories of her childhood and denies her sexuality by staying in a girls' club even after she has crossed the threshold of thirty years, which for the society she lives in is a time by which a woman must get married, and continues to wear dresses and style her hair like that of a young girl. As the narrator describes her, at thirty "she still wore her hair little-girl fashion on her shoulders and wore little-girl frocks in pastel colours" (Lessing 38). She does not think of marriage and is on friendly terms with the men she knows and with whom she attends sundowner parties. Even when she imagines a lover, she cannot relate to him sexually and so imagines him without hands and body. This attitude of Mary towards marriage and sex makes her a laughing stock among her friends and acquaintances :

A woman of thirty behaving like that! They laughed, rather unpleasantly; in this age of scientific sex, nothing seems more ridiculous than scientific gaucherie. They didn't forgive her; they laughed, and felt in some way it served her right. (Lessing 43)

Mary's psychic orientation makes her abhor marriage and makes life difficult for her when she enters the institution out of sheer social expectations. As Sheila Roberts puts it in her essay "Sites of Paranoia and Taboo: Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Gordimer's *July's People*", "Mary is a woman who through childhood trauma has been incapacitated for marriage. When she does marry because of perceived social pressures, she is almost immediately unhappy" (128). When Mary marries Dick she is supposed to relinquish her sexual fears but is unable to do so. She continues to hate any experience related to the body and the fact that she is with a man she does not like makes it no easy for her. Mary's attitude towards Dick is also complex. On the one hand she feels any sort of slightest connection with Dick only when he raises her on a pedestal and yet she abhors Dick because he is not strong enough a man she seems to have wanted.

Related to "repression" is Freud's concept of "projection", a defence mechanism in which "an internal perception is suppressed, and, by way of substitute, its content, having undergone a degree of distortion, is consciously registered as an external perception" (qtd in Jacobs 41). In Mary's case, her repressed sexuality and her discomfiture with her body is projected outwards, in her restlessness with the climate and in her treatment of the native

servants. Her hatred of the African men who she firmly believes are dishonest and cheeky can also be traced back to a fear instilled in her as a child by her mother that the blacks could do bad things to her, but her hatred of the African women is strictly related to their ease and acceptance of their body which is expressed in their act of suckling their babies openly – something that Mary cannot stand the sight of.

Mary is already balanced on a razor's edge when the entrance of Moses starts a whirlpool bringing her long repressed emotions into consciousness. This is more than Mary can handle and due to the inability to face her repressed emotions along with the guilt and confusion in her mind due to the dominant racial discourse of which she is a part, she refuses to accept what goes on in her mind, thus worsening her condition. Her feeling towards Moses who in his strength is a sharp contrast to her husband Dick is "one of a strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even – though she would not acknowledge it, would have died rather than acknowledge – of some dark attraction" (Lessing 154). This attraction mingled fear that Mary feels towards Moses is instrumental in bringing her to her mental breakdown. Mary's fear of Moses dates back to the time she hits him in the field when she is supervising the workers during Dick's sickness, the period when "Mary's repressed self (which identifies with her father) is brought into play" (Georgescu 29). When Dick, unaware of the incident brings Moses as a houseboy and warns Mary not to make him leave, her descent into madness begins. The powerfully built Moses exudes vibrations of sexuality, which makes the sexually repressed Mary afraid of Moses at the same time as being drawn to him. Though she refuses to accept her experience and her feelings consciously, they are revealed to her and the readers in a dream where the image of Moses becomes one with the image of her father: "They advanced together, one person, and she could smell, but the unwashed smell of her father" (Lessing 188). Mary's dream has a typical oedipal quality, where her repressed desire for her father gets one with her repressed desire for Moses. As Georgescu puts it, her desire for her father becomes her desire for Moses:

The primal taboo (desire for the parent) is thus safeguarded at the cost of transgressing another taboo desire for black Moses. . . . Lessing condenses the several important male figures in Mary's life into one – an image revealing (through her protagonist's feelings for her father) the source of Mary's frigidity, her need and dread of domination, and her repressed sexuality. (29-30)

From here on, Mary seems to fall headlong into an abyss of complete mental breakdown from where only death can rescue her. By the end of the novel she is a twisted woman on the verge of a breakdown. Her condition becomes such that even Tony Marston who is a new arrival at the farm is able to deduce quickly that Mary is a far gone off case, fit only for the psychologist. After she has attempted in vain to free herself from the influence of Moses, and the "return of the repressed" that he symbolises, by hoping for a short time that Marston can

be her rescuer, she realises that there is no hope for her. The last chapter of the novel is written from Mary's perspective and gives an insight into Mary's mind on her last day alive. She seems to feel that she has been waiting for a long time and that this day would release her from her problems. Her mind accepts death as the only way out, amidst pangs of fear and when Moses comes to take revenge, she feels guilty towards him and even has a feeling that she has only to explain to him and he would understand. There is, however, no chance for Mary to explain anything for she is killed by Moses before she can speak a word.

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