

The Ambivalence of the Woman Colonizer: A Study of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing depicts the tragedy of a white settler couple, Dick and Mary Turner and their native servant, Moses. Throughout the novel, Lessing is very critical of the so called civilized ideals and virtues of the white man. Dick is a white farmer who does not possess the exploiting attitude of the colonizer in order to succeed financially in a racial society. As a woman dissatisfied in marriage as well as a white woman brought up in a racial culture, Mary succumbs into a love-hate relationship with Moses and eventually gets killed in his hands. In this paper an effort has been made to analyze the position of power and powerlessness of Mary as a white woman in a bleak racial situation.

Key Words: Doris Lessing, colonial society, oppression, white farmer, mental breakdown.

Doris Lessing's first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) is set against the sombre background of Rhodesia with its highly explosive racial situation. In Lessing's own words, the novel focuses upon "white people in southern Rhodesia, but it could have been anywhere south of the Zambezi, white people who were not up to what is expected of them in a society where there is very heavy competition from the black people coming up" (Newquist 4). The novel depicts the tragic story of a white settler couple and their native servant while introducing many of the areas of concern such as racism, politics, gender ideology, repression and mental collapse. Lessing scathingly scrutinizes the civilized ideals and virtues of the white man and comments on the savagery evident in his instincts and basic drives in the form of a neurosis that lurks always beneath the 'civilized' surface. According to Eve Bertelsen, the novel offers "an explicit indictment of racist colonial society" (648).

It is through the character of Tony Marston that we come to know about the white couple Dick and Mary Turner and the causes leading to their tragedy. The novel begins shortly after the death of Mary at the hands of the black servant Moses and retrospectively explores the reasons of such violence. Tony is aware that the motives of the murder are complicated by Mary's emotional involvement with her black servant. Tony is a young man

recently over from England and is hired by Charlie Slatter to undertake the management of the Turners' farm. At first he feels like an outsider in his adopted country. His character is used to offer an alternative view of the colonial myth. He is still uncommitted to the assumptions and mores of settler life. He comes to know that —

“... it was ‘white civilization’ fighting to defend itself that had been implicit in the attitude of Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant. ‘White civilization’ which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly a white woman, can have a human relationship whether for good or evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. So, above all, it cannot afford failures, such as Turners’ failures.” (30)

The Turners' impoverished life style and Mary's death pose a severe threat to 'white solidarity' — a quality carefully cherished in the colonial society. Maintaining economic and cultural superiority over the natives is the first duty of a white coloniser. The Turners are disliked from the start by their farming neighbours because of their poverty and reclusion. The friendly overtures of Mrs. Slatter are never reciprocated by Mary. The Turners “apparently did not recognize the need for ‘esprit de corps’; that really, was why they were hated” (12). Their poverty is resented more than their lack of sociability. Charlie Slatter, therefore takes the responsibility of running Dick's farm in order to save the image of white superiority. Slatter prospers because he is both racist and patriarchal. He succeeds financially at farming at the cost of ruining the land as well as the people. Dick cares for the land, but it seems to fight him. No harmonious relationship between whites and ‘veld’ seems possible under colonialism. The most unusual aspect of the novel is the white neighbours' attitude to the murder of Mary. Though the white community has known about Mary's sexual attraction for Moses, they decide not to know it. Tony too has to learn to hide the knowledge and to adopt the double standards of his chosen society. He soon realizes that the community's “instinctive horror and fear” is to do with the threat to their entire social structure. In a broader sense, in order to survive in the colony, Charlie as well as Sergeant try “to wipe Mary's case out of history so as to cleanse the settlers' imaginations and memories” (Badode 48).

Charlie Slatter, the spokesman of the 'white civilization' has survived on the racial as well as material level by exploiting the labour of the black men on his farm for more than twenty years. He is a man who cannot help making money. The dictates he abides by reflect the racial attitude of colonial Africa — “You shall not mind killing if it is necessary” (15) and he once kills a native in a fit of temper. Or, “Thou shall not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are” (211). The dehumanization of the natives is explicit in Tony's shock reaction by the way the natives are treated — as if they were “so many cattle.” But even the newcomers like Tony “could not stand out against the society they were joining . . . It was hard, of course, becoming as bad oneself. But it was not very long that they thought of it as ‘bad’ . . . when it came to the point

one never had contact with the natives, except in the master-servant relationship . . .” (21). The laws regarding the black-white contact are so rigid that native police men cannot “lay hands on white flesh” or Dick for he is a white man, though mad. For the same reason Moses cannot ride in the same car with the corpse of Mary: “One could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she is dead, and murdered by him” (29). However, the kind of homogenous colonial attitude, both internalized and expected from the colonizer is not a given criteria that Lessing believes in. Lessing expresses her view that a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it. Perhaps the love of Africa will be strong enough to link all those people one day who hate each other now.

Dick embodies the co-existence of an intense love of Africa with a callous indifference towards its people. He is a ‘poor white’ who is disliked by others because he does not measure up to the ideal of a prosperous colonizer. He lacks the ruthless financial self-interest that is needed to farm successfully in the colony. He begins schemes for tree planting, bee keeping, pigs and turkeys and also begins a store but all these fall through. Heavy bank loans and wretched living conditions constitute his poverty and loneliness. Dick marries Mary as a fulfillment of social expectations. She respects him as a farmer as she believes that he is going through a necessary period of struggle before achieving the moderate affluence. Mary discovers the magnitude of Dick’s incompetence during her overseeing period of the farm. Their polar attitude towards the farm is another example of the fatally incompatible couple. For Mary the farm is a “machine for making money” while Dick can never “look at the farm as she did. He loved it and was part of it” (151).

Mary’s desire for a child is never fulfilled as Dick’s dream of having children depends on his dream of becoming a rich farmer. In the long run they are pushed away from each other for their “inexorably different needs” (153). Mary, according to Alka kumar, “manifests schizophrenia of a kind. There is a split between her two selves, the conforming and the rebellious, both of which are social constructs” (59). Before getting married to Dick she seems to have a smooth life as the personal secretary of her employer and a comfortable routine of an office who “liked things to happen safely one after another in a pattern” (41). She lives a complacent life in a girl’s club and models herself “on the more childish-looking film stars” (42). At the age of thirty she is shaken into finding a husband after overhearing her friends comment on her age, her manner of dressing and her unmarried status. What actually happens to her is something very crucial to her self-identity — “Mary’s idea of herself was destroyed and she was not fitted to recreate herself . . . she was hollow inside, empty and into this emptiness would sweep from nowhere a vast panic . . . it was impossible to fit together what she wanted for herself, and what she was offered” (52).

Mary’s childhood consists of poverty and the reality of her parents’ degrading marriage. Her father used to drink heavily to forget his weakness and failure. She grows up with a profound sense of disgust and fear of intimacy on one hand and a desire to assert her superiority, on the other. Being crippled emotionally at an early age, she is unable to adopt an

adult female role. Again she has been raised to fear and distrust the natives by her racist society. Finally, in order to fulfill her social obligations, she desperately plunges into marriage with Dick. She accepts him because his worship to her restores her feeling of “superiority to men”. But it is clear that their mutual understanding and sexual life is doomed as she quickly associates Dick with her hated and ineffectual father on her arrival at his farmhouse after their hasty marriage. She feels “her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother had” (66).

Simultaneously introduced to the institutions of marriage and apartheid, Mary cannot survive the double initiation into the realities of power. The Turners’ destitution is symbolized by the missing ceilings which could have cooled their sweltering hut in which she feels imprisoned. Confronted with the sense of inevitable alienation and drudgery of married life, her instinctive reaction is hostility towards the native servants. She is very much afraid of them due to her cultural training as well as her inexperience with their ways. She must confront the futility of her marriage and impossibility of survival in the veld. In a blind panic she leaves the farm for the town. She is rejected there and comes back to the farm, resigned. This unsuccessful attempt to run away from Dick and his sterile farm heralds the beginning of her inner disintegration. Mary is seen experiencing regression and the horror of nullity. Bertelsen feels that in Lessing’s parallelism of her “twin themes of racism and madness” lie the “social-democratic critique of her society and the consequences of colonial oppression for the personal psyche” (648).

Susan Gardner comments that:

A colonial white woman bears the dual burden of incarnating and transmitting ‘white civilisation’ biologically and socially. Her gender role obligates her to be heterosexual, to marry, to have children, and to inculcate the hierarchical, segregationist values of her society (it is Mary’s mother who forbids her to play with ‘dago’ children and trains her in the fear of black rapists). By the time she is married, Mary has no possibility of regarding African women as sisters under the skin: she perceives them as little more than incarnations of the sexuality she represses in herself. (53)

It is significant that Mary’s repressions surface through the interaction with an individual, Moses, who is a victim of colonialism. She feels triumphant at the emergence of her sexuality though “she suffers from a strange and irrational fear, the colonizer expecting the colonized to strike back perhaps” (Kumar 61).

Dick is taken ill and in one final effort at discipline and restraint, Mary takes on running of the farm. In a crisis of authority she whips across the face of Moses, the most outstanding and assertive of the native men working in the farm. It is a crucial moment when Dick, unaware of the incident, brings Moses as Mary’s next houseboy. The new servant enters Mary’s life when she is in despair and vulnerable. The final blow to her physical and

mental breakdown is dealt by her love-hate relationship with Moses. She finds herself helpless in an intimate relationship with him: “they were like two antagonists . . . Only he was powerful and sure of himself, and she was undermined by fear, by her terrible dream-filled nights, her obsession” (207). Moses’ powerful physicality is accompanied by a primeval energy and his close association with the soil indicates his libido. Mary experiences a conflict between sexual attraction and racial repulsion. She does not have strength to challenge the code and values of her racist society. On the other hand she cannot help herself from falling for Moses — “What had happened was that the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the personal relation” (177).

Once, Tony accidentally discovers Moses dressing Mary in her bedroom. In a hysterical attempt to regain control and save her face, Mary drives Moses out of the house. This deliberate action poses as a betrayal. She knows that Moses would take revenge — “There was no salvation: she would have to go through with it” (248). Though she goes to meet Moses in order to reconcile and reconnect: “to explain, to appeal”, yet she realizes her move is too late and eventually gets killed at his hands. The murderous intent of the ‘wronged’ native is assisted by the forces of nature — thunder, rain and lightning and “then the bush avenged itself” (254). According to Kata Gyuris,

(Mary’s) hatred towards Moses and all the blacks of Africa becomes a profound fear which pushes her into a subjugated position: Moses ceases to be a simple domestic servant; he practically becomes the guardian and benevolent parent of Mary. The scene where he dresses Mary shows that he has an absolute power over this weak and almost childlike woman. However, it is not until the very end of the story when he kills his mistress that violence actually emerges in him. (196)

The knowledge of impending death triggers off a number of insights within Mary about herself and life. She tells Tony — “I had been ill for years . . . Inside, somewhere . . . Everything wrong” (249). Tony observes that Mary often did the right thing, but for wrong reasons. If she could defy the oppressions of institutions such as colonialism, racism and even marriage out of convictions, rather than out of fear and neurosis, she would not have lost her grasp on life and succumb to mental breakdown. Or, her madness may be as Tony views it: “She can’t be mad. She doesn’t behave as if she were. She behaves simply as if she lives in a world of her own, where other people’s standards don’t count. She has forgotten what her own people are like. But then what is madness, but a refuge, a retreating from the world” (232). What Lessing herself has to say in this regard is: “People who are called mentally ill are often those who say to the society, ‘I am not going to live according to your rules. I am not going to conform.’ Madness can be a form of rebellion” (quoted in Schlueter 73).

While Mary’s civilized inhibitions cannot supply a sufficient authority or cohesive force in the rural African context, Dick cannot assert his manhood in the way either Mary or the landscape requires. Slatter survives with his faithfulness to both racism and colonialism.

Though Tony seems to be 'liberal', what he actually has in him is "the superficial progressiveness of the idealist that seldom survives a conflict with self-interest" (226). Moses seems to be the only person, with his sharp enquiring mind and physical strength, capable of making choice, asserting his identity / selfhood through his actions and accepting full responsibility for that. What is required in this regard is a deeper understanding of the problem and consequence of 'apartheid'. Moses may have to face the 'final judgment' and the whole scenario may seem unpromising. In this context the words of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O sound significant: "an oppressive racist society . . . can only produce an oppressive racist culture that cannot nourish and edify man" (13).

The Grass is Singing is a complex work with multilayered significance. The novel projects some autobiographical elements as it portrays the Turners in the model of Lessing's parents and includes vignettes of Rhodesian life she was once part of. It also explores psychological issues "mingled with the colour question, a personal human relationship examined against the impossibility of it" (Kumar 64). The novel also offers a critique of patriarchal standards / values which are so internalized that in order to respect herself, a woman (here Mary) needs to find 'worthiness' in her man: when she saw Dick "weak and goal-less, and pitiful, she hated him, and the hate turned in on herself" (156). In the conclusion we can say what Lessing once said on the issues of colour question and man-woman relationship: "all sorts of emotions that have nothing to do with colour get associated around the colour-bar. Similarly, with men and women, any sort of loaded point sucks in anger or fear . . . I don't think we understand nearly as much as we think we understand about what goes on" (quoted in Shlueter 87).

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