

Madness and Lack of Autonomy: A Close Reading of Mary's Gradual Mental Disorientation in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract

Madness in woman is explored in this article through a close reading of Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing (1950). The protagonist of the text, Mary, longs for an autonomous identity. Failing to achieve autonomy makes her vulnerable in conforming to the social expectation and destroys her self-esteem. This article has explored three phases of Mary's life—spinsterhood, unhappy married life, and her journey to sexual awakening which only gets repressed again by the racial oppression she faces as a white woman being in love with a colored man. This article has discussed the destructive influence of racism and class distinction on a woman's sexuality, as a way to oppress the psyche of a woman. I have come to the conclusion that a woman's failure to gain autonomous sexual identity is one of the main reasons behind her neurosis.

If the individual does not feel himself to be autonomous this means that he can experience neither his separateness from, nor his relatedness to the other in the usual way.

—Laing 52

In the novel *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing shows how Mary, having been independent for a long time, becomes confused about what to do when she finds that the role she has played is not what society considers suitable for women. The idea that she is not what she should be keeps haunting her till she is killed by Moses, her native servant, with whom she was almost as intimate as a lover. In fact, she is simultaneously oppressed in two ways: by her race and her gender. Moses's power over Mary is generated not only because of Mary's vulnerability or weakness, but also because she is a white woman and Moses, a black man. The lack of autonomy in Mary, the middle-aged woman in Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*, makes her vulnerable and she gradually becomes psychologically unable to control her life. To understand the gradual mental disintegration of Mary we need to analyze the three phases of Mary's life—spinsterhood, married life, and sexual awakening.

Spinsterhood, the happiest time of her life

For Mary, the happiest time of her life was her unmarried and independent life. Lessing shows it to be the only time in Mary's life that is unaffected by childhood memories, free from all the traces of her past. She is a woman with a good job and a reputation for being a "comfortable maiden aunt" (Lessing 43) who was always there to listen to other people's problems.

She has created a substitute for everything that she wants to reject from her childhood. She could have lived in a separate house, but she preferred to live in an unmarried girls' hostel. Living in a hostel saves her from the depressive memory of her childhood home, but on the other hand, by living among others like her and listening to all their troubles, she never gets

the chance to know about any stories of married life other than that of her parents. Therefore, her ideas about marriage remains fixed. In this way she is like Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), who is similarly protected from outside knowledge. The only difference is Pecola is not a part of the southern social life whereas Mary is never alone for a moment. Despite this, she is not aware of the social gaze. She goes out with boys but never gets involved in any sexual relationship, the way Esther in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) wanted to. For her, men were like her good friends and never more than that. She is feminine but she prefers to portray herself as a "childish-looking" (Lessing 45) heroine as if subconsciously trying to repress her sexuality to save herself from the male gaze. Her opinion of men is that "They get all the fun" (Lessing 46). Her memory of her father laughing at her panic is related to her generalized notions about men. So, she avoids men as sexual beings and regards them only as friends. She is physically very active, playing tennis, hockey or swimming, and watching movies almost daily. In spite of being an independent woman, however, we cannot say she is autonomous as she cannot see her own independence nor can she compare herself with other women of her age.

Unfortunately, Mary's "free life" is interrupted by society, and the criticism levels against her for being what she is. Ann Barr Snitow, in her essay "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different," says:

When women try to picture excitement, the society offers them one vision, romance. When women try to imagine companionship, the society offers them one vision, male, sexual companionship, the power to attract a man. ... When women try to project a unique self, the society offers them very few attractive images. True completion for women is nearly always presented as social, domestic, sexual.

One of our culture's most intense myths, the ideal of an individual who is brave and complete in isolation, is for men only. Women are grounded, enmeshed in civilization, in social connection, in family and in love ... while all our culture's rich myths of individualism are essentials closed to them. Their one socially acceptable moment of transcendence is romantic. (197)

Snitow explains Mary's helpless situation. Mary, just because she is a woman, fails to remain free. All her trust and dependence on the friendliness of her acquaintances is shattered when she overhears two of her friends discussing her: "[S]he will never marry. She just isn't like that, isn't like that at all. Something missing somewhere" (Lessing 48). Thus, Snitow's explanation fits here. Her friends ridicule her for not conforming to social expectations. Mary's problem is she lacks self-consciousness. According to R.D. Laing, self-consciousness "implies two things: an awareness of oneself by oneself, and an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else's observation" (206). Mary was not aware of what she really wanted and at the same time she was not sure how much she wanted to comply with others' wishes or expectations. Therefore, when the "idea of herself was destroyed ... she was not fitted to recreate herself" (Lessing 52). Mary felt that somehow she has misunderstood her own self and the people surrounding her. She was more troubled and disturbed because her friends never said anything directly

and openly to her. This contradictory attitude sows the seeds of paranoia in Mary. She starts suspecting everyone's affection for her. Thus, Mary's state of spinsterhood is disturbed when she can no longer trust anyone. Simultaneously, she tries to be attractive to men even while feeling uncomfortable around them. While Mary is in this miserable state, Dick comes into her life. Dick and Mary, with complete opposite views, marry each other because both of them were badly in need of love. However, Mary still fails to understand her own self which, together with Dick's stubbornness, makes the marriage a failure and accelerates her mental disorientation.

Married life, a period of reliving the childhood trauma

Unfortunately, her fear of an unhappy married life comes true when she marries Dick. Her marriage with Dick brings back her memories of her own dysfunctional family. The very day she comes to Dick's home, she

[begins] to feel slowly, that it was not in this house she was sitting, with her husband, but back with her mother, watching her endlessly contrive and patch and mend—till suddenly she got to her feet with an awkward scrambling movement, unable to bear it; possessed with the thought that her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead. (Lessing 66)

Thus, from the very first day the memory of childhood paternal oppression keeps haunting her and takes reign over her life. Again her lack of autonomy leads her to dwell in the memory of her parents. She herself becomes her own mother. Furthermore, memory of her "father, menacing and horrible, who touched her in desire" (Lessing 204) keeps haunting her to such an extent that she becomes sexually frigid. When Dick tries to consummate their marriage, she felt

[it] was not so bad, ... when it was all over: not as bad as *that*. It meant nothing to her, nothing at all. 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. (Lessing 66)

As a consequence, memories of incestuous sexuality make Mary sexually frigid. Her sexual frigidity becomes the crucial reason for the failure of their marriage. Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman report in their article "Father-Daughter Incest" that a girl usually suppresses her feelings when the incest is actually occurring because "passive resistance and dissociation of feeling [seems] to be among the few defenses available in an overwhelming situation. Later, this [carries] over into relations with others" (750). Therefore, it can be said that Mary's emotional distance from Dick is the unconscious continuation of the process of protecting herself from the trauma. As a consequence, Mary is relieved when they cannot go for their honeymoon, and she is disinterested in having children. Dick's touch makes her recoil. Moreover, Margaret W. Matlin reports in her book, *Psychology of Women*, that

A disorder of low sexual desire may be caused by a variety of psychological factors, including a more general problem such as depression or anxiety. A woman, who is not

satisfied with her romantic partner or their relationships may also experience little sexual desire. (30)

In Mary's case, her depression arose from the traumatic resemblance of her marital home with that of her parents' home.

Though Mary is reluctant, Dick feels the need for children to work as a bridge between him and Mary:

Children were what he wanted now that his marriage was a failure and seemed impossible to right. Children would bring them close together and break down this invisible barrier. But they simply could not afford to have children. When he had said to Mary (thinking she might be longing for them) that they would have to wait, she had assented with a look of relief. He had not missed that look, but perhaps when he got out of the wood, she would be pleased to have children. (Lessing 100)

The above passage shows the distance between Mary and Dick. Later, when out of loneliness and without any true longing for children, Mary begs Dick for a child, Dick is unwilling to have children because of poverty. Mary, who never thought of her age earlier, now becomes aware of the fact that very soon menopause will bring an end to all the expectations of children. Dick's reaction to Mary's pleading seems almost indifferent, though the novel does not really show Dick's negligence towards her. It can be said that Dick's inability to realize the importance of fertility in his wife closes the chapter regarding children forever. Since Mary has never been an assertive woman, the issue of children is dropped. Once more, we see Mary's dilemma about what she wants and her failure to be an assertive woman. When her distaste of sex makes her disinterested in having children, it is her loneliness that makes her worry about menopause, the end of her fertility to bear a child. So, here we see that for a mature woman the end of a woman's fertility can be a reason to be worried too.

Mary's married life is further doomed by poverty. She tries to make up for the frigidity of her marriage by decorating her home. She spends all her savings on it and therefore "[t]he house gradually lost its air of bleak poverty, and put on an inexpensive prettiness, with bright hangings and some pictures" (Lessing 73). However, though she tries to erase the appearance of poverty, she can do nothing to increase family income. She repeatedly refuses Dick's appeal to help him with the farm as she is paranoid, feeling that, in her absence from the house, the native houseboy would either be stealing or "looking through her personal things" (Lessing 84). She also prefers not to advise Dick over farm affairs because secretly she feels the need to see Dick more capable than herself, someone stronger than her to take care of her. At the same time, she keeps dreaming that one day she will go back to her old job. She even tries to go back once, but unfortunately finds that she is no longer accepted there. She loses her capacity to day-dream. Dick refuses to put a ceiling, bringing in the factor of heat very strongly into the text. She thinks with frustration that "these rooms added to the house would have made their life comfortable: the money spent on the store, the turkey runs, the pigsties, the beehives, would have put ceilings into the house, would have taken the terror out of the thought of the approaching hot season" (Lessing 114). The ceiling which seems absolutely unimportant to Dick becomes the cause of Mary's dwindling sanity.

This progress towards the loss of sanity causes Mary to go beyond reality and have hallucinations about the power of nature. Nature works as a supernatural force on Mary. Before her marriage, nature had nothing to do with her inner self, but the constant extremely torturing heat in Dick's house gradually makes itself an overpowering force on Mary's body and mind. The cold and rainy seasons become her driving forces. Nature even starts to influence the relationship between Dick and her. Once, after a quarrel over the houseboy, "the tension between them lasted for an intolerable week, until at last the rains fell, and the air grew cool and relaxed" (Lessing 97). But she cannot enjoy the winter which she felt "had been sent especially for her, to send a tinge of vitality into her, to save her from her helpless dullness" (Lessing 128) without remembering the dreadful return of the hot season. She is so much under the control of the seasons that when she realizes the fatal emptiness in her, she decides "When the next cold season came, and stung her into life again, she would do something" (Lessing 163). Thus, it can be said that nature becomes an oppressive force for Mary. Even when she was about to die, Mary feels that the "trees [are advancing] in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder [is] the noise of their coming" (Lessing 254). Laing says "the 'self' whose relatedness to reality is already tenuous becomes less and less a reality-self, and more and more fantasized as it becomes engaged in fantastic relationships with its own phantoms" (85). So, with each passing day, she loses more of her connection with reality and becomes a prey of nature. Now, at this moment when she is losing touch with reality, her sexual awakening brings an end to the little rationality which she still held in herself, leading to her relationship with Moses.

Confrontation between sexual awakening and social restrictions

Female sexuality is always under the social gaze and the double standard in attitude towards male and female sexuality restrains a woman from exercising her sexual rights. If a woman does break the "love law," a term used by Arundhati Roy in her book *The God of Small Things*, for social rules of who can love whom and how much (33), then she has to pay a high price, often even with her mental wellbeing. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy shows how Ammu's desire for an Untouchable is equally scorned by the society and her family, while her brother Cholly's relationship with servant girls is accepted easily by Mammachi's consideration that "[h]e can't help having a Man's Needs" (128). In the same way, white men were allowed to take black women as sexual partners. Ammu's life is a picture of what Mary's life would have been if she had accepted Moses. When the family learnt that Ammu has had sex with an Untouchable, she was kept locked in her room "like the family lunatic in a medieval household" (Roy 252). Like Ammu, Mary's sexual awakening also becomes destructive for her as it is caused by the entrance of a black man into her life, a man who is not from her class and who must be treated like an animal. Mary's need for someone stronger than her takes the shape of her attraction for that "powerful, broad-built body" (Lessing 175). Had it not been a black body, she would have been saved from the humiliation of social ostracism. In D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, we see that, like Mary, Connie happens to be present when Mellors, her servant was bathing and, in the same way, was attracted by his strong body. But the difference between Connie and Mary is that Connie is attracted to someone, who though her subordinate, is considered as a human by her society since he is white. But Mary is attracted

to a black man “who is no better than a dog” (Lessing 176). The intermingling feelings of guilt and hatred make her vulnerable, while Connie could remain in a stable relationship with Mellors who is at least physically healthier than her handicapped husband. The omniscient narrator tries to explain Mary’s sense of repulsion, “what had happened was that the formal pattern of black-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the present relation. She felt that she must do something, and at once, to restore her poise “(Lessing 178). To restore that “poise” she becomes harsher to Moses. She becomes delirious and “rigid with a hysterical emotion” (Lessing 177) and she verbally abuses Moses. After one such outburst Moses wants to resign. But even when Moses tries to leave, Mary does not let him go. In fact, she panics, dreading Dick’s anger. Her panic reaches such a height that it turns into convulsions and “she wept on, repeating over and over again, ‘You must stay! You must stay!’ And all the time she was filled with shame and mortification because he was seeing her cry” (Lessing 186). This breakdown in front of Moses becomes a turning point for Mary, bringing an end to the last trace of rational individuality in her.

This mixture of repulsion and attraction puts her in a dilemma. Moses’s caring touch makes her feel as if she has “been touched by excrement” (Lessing 187). Again when Moses speaks to her “easily, almost familiarly, good-humouredly as if he was humouring a child ... [s]he [feels] the usual anger within her, at the tone he used to her, at the same time she was fascinated, and out of her depth; she did not know what to do with this personal relation” (Lessing 189). Thus, Moses starts looking after her meals, bringing gifts. Because of the racial and class differences Mary cannot see and accept her heart’s desire—Moses’s tenderness.

However, while there is pure love in the affair between Velutha and Ammu in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, the relationship between Mary and Moses is unable to reach a culmination because of Mary’s learned hatred for the Black servant, Moses, and in return, his manipulative attitude with Mary, a white mistress. He compels Mary

to treat him as a human being; it is impossible for her to thrust him out of her mind like something unclean, as she had done with all the others in the past. She was being forced into contact, and she never ceased to be aware of him. She realized, daily, that there was something in it that was dangerous but what it was she was unable to define. (Lessing 192)

The domination of a white woman by a black man reminds us of Frantz Fanon’s insight into the black men’s desire in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*,

I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*. ...

By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. ... When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine. (Fanon 63)

If Mary complies with Moses’s wishes and caring, it is not because she wants them wholeheartedly; it is more because she is completely helpless in front of Moses’s concerns. The omniscient narrator informs us that “she [watches] her actions from one point of view

only; would they allow Moses to strengthen that new human relationship between them, in a way she could not counter, and which she could only try to avoid” (Lessing 193). So, even when Mary consents to Moses’s offer of help, she does it out of fear. Her inability to take care of her clothes and her hair shows the fatal destruction of Mary’s self-control. Moses, by nurturing Mary as if she is not an adult woman but a child, is also destroying Mary’s individuality in the same way that white people have done to the black people. In fact, Moses admits that by his manipulating power he has defeated Dick a long time ago and now by killing Mary he has defeated Tony Marston, another white man, who tried to save Mary from his power.

However, it is not only racial issues but the childhood memory of her sexually abusive father that makes Mary a prey to Moses. The more she gives in to Moses’s commands, the more she remembers the suffocating moments with her father. She starts having nightmares about her father and Moses. Linda Schierse Leonard reports in her experimental book, *The Wounded Woman: Healing the Father-Daughter Relationship*, that women with “injured relationships to their fathers” dream about a “perverted old man” (85). This “perverted” image in Mary’s dreams controls her emotions more than what is inspired by Moses’ direct presence. Leonard explains this as follows:

The perverted man was able to control her and keep her out of meaningful relationship only because she gave him the power through her innocence and lack of feminine assertion, through the fact that she remained passive and dependent, enacting the girl rather than the self-confident woman ... Women who as young girls have been subjected to sexual abuse or even rape by older men have experienced this perversion ... in a most severe way. As a result their self-confidence has usually been severely damaged, and if one looks deep within one can find the perverted old man, a torturing, negative animus continuing that abuse. (91)

This finding by Leonard clarifies the relation between Mary’s dream images with Moses as a real person. She has always remained a girl and never could be a self-dependent woman and thereby the weakness of her heart develops this terrible father image like a Frankenstein killing the owner day by day. During Dick’s illness, when Moses was sleeping in Dick’s room and Mary in the next room, for the first time she is sleeping too close to a native and she imagines that she can smell the scent of natives, which she associated with the traumatic memory of her father’s “unwashed masculine smell” (Lessing 201). She also has recurring nightmares where her father and Moses becomes one single person. According to Freud, dreams are the reflection of the unconscious. So, from the above passage, it may be understood that Mary finds consolation in the way Moses takes care of her. But failing to resolve the dilemma, Mary becomes more vulnerable. She realizes that

Dick became to her, as time went by, more and more unreal; while the thought of the African grew obsessive. It was a nightmare, the powerful black man always in the house with her, so that there was no escape from his presence. She was possessed by it, and Dick was hardly there for her. (Lessing 206)

She becomes more and more confused about Moses. With the help of Tony Marston, the

Englishman who comes to take on the responsibility of Dick's farm, she even fires the boy. Again guilty feelings keep haunting her and she becomes sure that Moses will come to kill her. Pathetically, she understands her strong feelings for him only at the last moment. She was about to apologize and explain it to Moses but at that very moment Moses kills her. This sudden self-realization can be compared with Anna Karenina's feelings. When out of her confusion and frustration she wants to commit suicide, at the very last moment, she comes to her senses and feels the urge to save herself. But she could not save herself from the coming train. Anna and Mary's dilemma appears to imply that since a woman cannot assert her decisions in her life due to social restrictions, it becomes really difficult for her to resolve the most important questions in her life. A woman throughout her life is taught to live according to social or patriarchal rules and is rarely allowed to choose her own path. So, both consciously and unconsciously, she thinks about how others will judge her actions and thereby often refrains from accepting her inner wishes.

Conclusion

Lack of autonomy can make a woman vulnerable to the social gaze which can destroy her inner strength. In spite of leading a free life for fifteen years, Mary cannot continue with it. Her loneliness, sexuality, poverty-stricken married life and her attraction towards a black man make her life so complicated that she does not find a way out of it. It can be concluded that when an adult woman lacks autonomy like Mary in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* she becomes doomed to lose her rationality. It can be concluded, therefore, that a woman's sexuality is one of the main reasons for her neurosis. If Mary were an unmarried man, she would never be subjected to social criticism about being someone less for remaining unmarried. Thus, reading the gradual disintegration of Mary's mental sanity shows that sometimes it is sexual abuse that makes a woman mad and sometimes it is both her sexual abuse and repression of sexual desires that result in a mental imbalance.

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