

The Paradoxical Hierarchy in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*

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Abstract: Doris Lessing (1919–), who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007, depicts many aspects of postcolonial African life in a number of novels such as *The Grass Is Singing*, *The Golden Notebook*, etc. *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), Lessing's first novel, draws a picture of country life in Southern Rhodesia in the 1940s mirroring the postcolonial ambivalence between the colonizers and the colonized in the former British colony. Living standard of the white settlers and their suppression of the black natives cause a dilemma of hierarchy between these settlers. The protagonist Mary, being white, cannot tolerate the native black people but cannot help being subjugated by one of the black houseboys, Moses. Mary's death in the hands of Moses shows the sufferings of a woman who is torn between her social status and her surrounding conditions. This paper attempts to illustrate how Mary becomes a victim of a fight between her colonial principles and her shattered personality.

The Grass Is Singing is a novel about racial conflict. It begins with a piece of news about the mysterious murder of a white woman by her houseboy, who, it seems, has committed the crime in search of money and jewelry. In a place where people are highly sensitive to colour, this incident should become a matter of concern. Ironically, the opening chapter, which is rather the sequel of the rest of the novel, shows the nonchalant attitude of the whites living in the neighbourhood to the victimized family, the Turners. The white neighbours are also irritated at the way the Turners used to lead their life in Ngesi, the countryside where the farm-house of Dick Turner is located. This negligence of the other whites to the Turners is due to the latter's living standard. Being white, Dick and Mary are expected to have a somewhat lavish lifestyle. Instead, Dick, as a farmer, fails to enhance his financial condition, which gradually worsens and they become "poor whites" (Lessing: 11). The opening chapter further narrates the issue of race among the whites by dividing them into two groups – British and Afrikaans. The Turners belong to the second group. This division in the standard of life creates a realm of hierarchy, which makes Mary its victim.

Mary is Rhodesian by birth. She has never gone to England, which she considers her "Home" (37). Her family background is depressing, full of quarrels between her parents. She takes the side of the oppressed, her mother, whom she has seen

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struggle all through her life. Then a separation followed by their death relieves Mary of any family bondage. She enjoys her life, her work, the company of her friends. Mary passes her carefree days, until she overhears comments of some of her friends about her getting old and yet maintaining the life of a maiden. This all on a sudden pushes her to consider beginning a married life. She was, in fact, "all the time, unconsciously, without admitting it to herself . . . looking for a husband" (51). As she passes her days, she meets a farm-man Dick, whose "dream was to get married and have children" (55). Settlement between these two might lead to an acceptable bond, where the wife, living all the time in the town, cherishes a "feeling of superiority to men, which was really, at bottom, what she had been living from all these years," and the husband, "suffered from claustrophobia. He . . . always escaped . . . to his farm, where he felt at home" (53).

Lessing presents Mary in a sympathetic way, even though she does not hesitate to show the racist mentality among the white settlers. Mary is rigid; she cannot adapt herself to the situation. As her background sets her against the blacks, her compromised marriage gets her against her husband and the natives. She simply cannot hold back her class; she is rather married to "class." Her escape from Dick's farm and return to it with Dick's help brings little change in her attitude towards others. She inherits from her mother a sense of "arid feminism" (Lessing 41), which lends her "the uncertainties of a confrontation with colonized peoples" (Boehmer 74). Lessing portrays Mary as a compartmentalized character, "the stress on sameness encouraged the portrayal of otherness – all that was not white and not male – as feminine" (Boehmer 74). Dick struggles against what he believes his home, the farmland. He is not a successful farmer, "If there was a drought he seemed to get the brunt of it, and if it rained in swamps then his farm suffered most" (Lessing 56). Farming for him is not an encouraging experience. A man, who comes of a broken family and tries his fortune in several ways, thus finds himself betrayed by it. Yet, giving up is not Dick's nature; he possesses an unyielding pride. His growing up is similar to Mary's: both hate their fathers, and cling to their mothers. Like Mary, Dick also nurtures a strong sense of pride and racism. He does not want to realize his fault, nor does he want any suggestion or guideline from anyone. As Boehmer explains, "A young middleclass man in search of a colonial career could rest assured that whatever choice he made would land him in the ranks of an exclusively male hierarchy" (72).

After his marriage, Dick confronts Mary's pride and finds it difficult to give in to her pride. He gradually segregates himself not only from the family but also from his neighbours, as one critic says, "Plantation slavery and later schemes of indentureship left in their wake diverse groups of people cut off from their communities of origin" (King 46). Dick's sense of life and work, diametrically opposing Mary's, creates a sense of responsibility in him. He does not let Mary

or anyone else realize that as a person, he is ignored. When Mary, out of nothingness, wants desperately a child from Dick, he rejects it silently because he "saw she was desiring a child for her own sake, and that he still meant nothing to her, not in any real way" (Lessing 165). His pride is challenged by Mary's desire of having a child, which he had wanted earlier, but she did not like to have. Mary, in contrast, never even imagines to be sublimated by Dick or anyone else, neighbours or natives. She maintains her rigid pride, even though she misses the point that she has been cornered, or colonized by Dick, the farmland and by the natives. The outcome of this contrast is that the whole atmosphere in Ngesi "reduced the colonists and colonized to positions of social negligibility, and yet trained these people to accept their connection with Empire as their only access to greatness" (King 103). Mary's sense of hierarchy is trapped in "either urban individuality or rural communalism . . . [where] . . . life . . . becomes rigidly compartmentalized with Victorian attitudes of a woman's place in the home . . ." (King 242).

Dick's malarial illness lends Mary an opportunity to control many natives working on his farmland and thus she gets back her frustrated pride of superiority. In the course of events she feels outraged as one of these "animals" wants to drink water and says so in her own language, English. Eventually she whips across the face of the native. Her indomitable pride does not allow Dick to set up a store in the farmland for selling goods to the natives. She remembers how her mother ran such a store and shed tears silently. She does not want her weakness to be exposed, nor does she want her bitter childhood memories to revive. She wants a life which is full of dignity, a life where she is the supreme. She suffers at the beginning as her pride is crushed by her friends, and she suffers now because of Dick. Therefore, whenever possible, she tries to demolish any obstacle in her way of life. She even feels superior to other whites, although she does not want to acknowledge that she is pitied by others. This situation brings Mary to an inadvertent dilemma which generates from her sense of hierarchy.

Lessing further illustrates Mary's duality in her treatment of the white settlers and the black natives. Mary, in her everyday life, cannot cope with the reality and, as a result, becomes lonely. All day long without Dick in the house spending time becomes a torture for her. Changing houseboys frequently does not improve the condition. Dick, on his part, feels disgusted at Mary's antipathy towards the helping hands and finally brings the best of them – Moses, who, Dick warns Mary, cannot be replaced. This ultimatum forces Mary to accept the presence of Moses in the house, though not without disgust. But it is more horror than disgust, for she knows that this is the very boy whom she had whipped earlier. The novel reveals the colonizer/colonized paradox with the appearance of Moses as Mary subconsciously retains a sense of hatred towards Moses, but yet develops a kind of forced reliability on him. Moses, the smart black boy, understands Mary's situation and slowly but steadily mesmerizes her. She cannot

let Moses go away; that would be fatal. Yet she cannot let Moses stay in; that would also be disastrous. This situation arises as a result of Mary's previous action; she is in constant fear that he might attack her. But not being able to share it with Dick, she becomes more and more helpless. Paradoxically, Moses' "powerful, broad-built body fascinated her" (Lessing: 175).

At one time when Moses gives notice of leaving, Mary, deadened with fear of Dick's anger, does not burst into rage. Rather, to "her horror she discovered she was shaking with sobs again, there, in front of the native!" (185) This gives Moses an opportunity to take control of Mary as he brings a glass of water and asks her to drink it, and Mary cannot but obey. She misses this suppressing care of the boy. Her open fear of Moses and silent appreciation of his body create yet another type of ambivalence in her. She feels both separated from and embedded in Ngesi. Mary, a strong colonial figure, thus becomes colonized for the second time, and this time more miserably by one who is supposed to be colonized. Moses now practices the force of becoming a colonizer himself, as Boehmer explains: "The feminization of colonized men under empire had produced, as a kind of defensive reflex, an aggressive masculinity in the men who led the opposition to colonialism" (216). Mary cannot tolerate this oppression, but she finds no means of escape from it. She completely alienates herself from all the household activities, even from Dick. The colonizer/colonized relationship between Mary and Moses takes on a new reality, where she finds herself "helplessly in his power" (Lessing 190). She resigns her authority, and accepts that of Moses. Mary's carnal desire lurking in her unusual appearance is further illustrated by Jane Freedman as she summarizes Cynthia Enloe's argument that "the relations between colonizers and colonized involved . . . gender relations and gendered domination" (83). Her opinion about the natives before her marriage and the new thought about them, both in presence of Moses and with Dick's ultimatum, create confusion and a sense of emptiness in her mind. She experiences nightmares in her sleep. The gradual deterioration of her mental state and the inconsistency of her relationship with others weaken her self-control. A defeated Mary continues to live like a ghost. Even though she becomes indifferent to everything, only in case of Moses she remains sensitive. He takes full control of her, and her submission to him creates a colonial ground for him. In this ground Dick is only an apparition, and Mary and Moses are "like two antagonists, silently sparring. Only he was powerful and sure of himself, and she was undermined with fear, by her terrible dream-filled nights, her obsession" (Lessing 207).

Dick is not unaware of Mary's condition. On his part, he remains aloof from his environs. Both the Turners suffer from the same sort of dilemma: a dilemma of hierarchy, which arises from the feeling that their sense of pride is shaken and shattered. As Dick's obsession is only with the farm, he is able to control himself. In Mary's case, the situation is quite different. She is just blown away by

the conflict between her pride and her sensibilities. Mary can realize her inescapable situation. She is psychologically averse to Moses, but physically drawn to him. As Dick has no meaning in her life, her biological self demands something like a little care, which she gets from Moses. Again, this violation of her own sense of superiority pushes her to her original dilemma of having to envision the reality in a mirror, where only shadows are seen, and to borrow a phrase from Tennyson, Mary is "half sick of shadows" (LI: 71). She assumes the role of the Lady of Shalott, who in spite of the information of the curse, violates her norm and gets the result:

She looked down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror cracked from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott. (LI: 113-117)

Mary has violated her code of conduct, and this violation "cracked the wholeness of her vision" (Lessing 241). She must face the curse of the cracked mirror now. In Goodman's words, "The cracking mirror could be seen as a symbol of the cracking sanity of the Lady, who is faced with irreconcilable demands as she tries to negotiate the role she is expected to play – a role symbolized by the oppressive system of constraints to her freedom – and her own wishes and (sexual) desires" (112).

Mary meets another young white settler, Tony Marston, who she thinks is too young to handle her situation. It is Tony who incidentally finds out the sexual relationship between Mary and Moses. He is awestruck, but remains silent for the time being, though he later asks Moses to leave. He is short of realizing the trend of the country. Charlie Slatter, the Turners' neighbour, rather suspects something beyond normal master/servant relationship between Mary and Moses. The way Mary asks Moses to bring oranges seems suspect to Charlie, who at once bursts out in anger and orders the servant to get out of the room. His is a voice of dominance, and Moses follows. His order comes in plain English, and Moses even forgets how to react, for he realizes his powerlessness in front of Charlie. This is in keeping with what Ashcroft says about language and power, "The dialectic of self and Other, indigene and exile, language and place, slave and free, which is the matrix of post-colonial literature, is also an expression of the way in which language and power operate *in the world*" (170-71). Charlie persuades the Turners to go for a vacation for some months and abandon the farm. They agree reluctantly. Charlie understands Mary's helpless state of mind, but Dick hardly does so. Charlie senses the authoritarian influence of Moses on Mary, but Dick cannot recognize it. Mary's dependence on Moses belittles her standard, and Charlie hints at it. He simply follows "the dictate of the first law of white South

Africa, which is: 'Thou shalt 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'" (Lessing 221).

Mary's reliance upon Moses breaks the code of repression. Though at the beginning she is the repressor, in course of time she has turned subconsciously into the repressed. She bemoans her bygone days, the years when she had been free from any kind of anxiety, living all by herself and no one to care for. She even reproaches Tony for ordering Moses to leave; now Dick would certainly become furious. Mary's current admonition, in Freud's words, borders on anxiety and reproach. "The ambivalence which has enabled repression through reaction-formation to take place," says Freud, "is also the point at which the repressed succeeds in returning. The vanished affect comes back in its transformed shape as social anxiety, moral anxiety and unlimited self-reproaches . . ." (533). Mary's uncontrolled mental agony, the loss of her individuality is seen as a means of escape from the colonizer/colonized relationship. This she does through her sexual desire for Moses, who is, at the same time, a trap and a means of escape for her. Her biological need, loneliness and frustration give rise to her madness, which she cannot escape.

Thus an absurd relationship develops between the master and the servant, who swap their positions. Revelation of this hurts them both: Mary, by her reality and Moses, in his pride. To Moses Dick has no significance at all, because he has defeated him earlier. He evaluates Dick as "His enemy, whom he had outwitted . . ." (Lessing 255). Moses is always careful about Mary. He does not impose anything; everything is self-ordained. At the beginning Mary practices cruelty on him, but later forfeits herself to her sexual attraction towards him. This, in Freudian term, is psychic. "The history of human civilization," says Freud, "shows beyond any doubt that there is an intimate connection between cruelty and the sexual instinct; . . . it is a contribution derived from the apparatus for obtaining mastery, which is concerned with the satisfaction of the other . . ." (302). Mary and Moses develop their bond in this way. But out of this impracticable reality comes out Mary's bipolar disorder. The colonial norms are ruined. But as Moses is banished from the house, Mary is frightened. She realizes the strength of Moses' grasp on her; he is not going to give up his object of affection. Either he gets it, or nobody else does. The outcome is Mary's death in his hand. But after the murder Moses does not run away. He sits in a corner and waits for the police to arrest him and take him away. The mystery of the murder remains unsolved, though for Charlie it is the sheer dominance of the dominated. Lessing gives a hint to the solution, "Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say" (256).

Mary understands Moses' threat, but her attempt to escape is futile. She at the last moment comes to self-realization, which is important for living in Africa. Tony, the new-comer, has yet to comprehend the hidden reality of life in Africa. He comes from Europe to Africa for making a fortune, but unfortunately is caught up in an ambivalence of settler/native quagmire. Ashcroft writes, "In one very significant way the 'discovery' of Africa was the dominant paradigm for the self-discovery of the twentieth-century European world in all its self-contradiction, self-doubt, and self-destruction, for the European journey out of the light of Reason into the Heart of Darkness" (158). For new-comers like Tony, it is brutal the way the natives are treated. But for old settlers like Charlie, no one should live in Africa without harmonizing with the ideas of the settlers. For them, words like "equality" and "humanity" are antagonistic to their sense of hierarchy. Mary is not interested in adapting herself to the environment for fear of losing her pride. Yet, she does so without acknowledging it. This vast land, the veld, this British colony, turns Mary's temper into a nightmare. What was so important in her life becomes a burden for her. This is how Mary's sense of hierarchy becomes a paradox in her life.

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