

## Doris Lessing's 'The Grass Is Singing': A Feminist Approach

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### Abstract

Doris Lessing, the winner of the coveted Nobel Prize for literature for the year 2008, is one of the most significant contemporary English novelists. Her works are characterized by a variety of themes --- feminism, colonialism, racism, Communism, violence of war, psycho-analysis, mysticism, and exploring the space. All her novels express her concern for a better society, a society that can ensure justice and equality to all its members. Doris Lessing associates the problems of women with those of the black as both belong to the oppressed class of the White male-dominated English society in South Africa. This is evident, more than anywhere else, in her novel, 'The Grass is Singing'. The paper intends to study this novel by Doris Lessing, from a feminist perspective.

**Key Words:** Feminism, colonialism, racism, communism, male-domination

'The Grass is Singing' (1950), with which Doris Lessing made her literary debut, traces the life of Mary Turner, who represents the early phase of the New Woman in Doris Lessing's novels. The novel begins with a factual account of Mary's death and in an extended flashback unfolds the tragic life of this woman. Mary Turner's murder by her black servant Moses, has its causes as long back as Mary's childhood and they lie in the conventions of society that inhibit and limit her being. Being a White member of the conservative English society in South Africa, Mary is influenced by the racial prejudices of that society. Because of her childhood of misery and poverty, she has also been turned into an emotionally frigid woman. After escaping the tyrannies of her parent's family, Mary leads a happy life as a typist in the town. She apparently leads the 'free' life of a New Woman—intelligent and efficient enough to stand on her own, without needing anybody's support. Mary does not feel like

entering into any emotional relationship with men. Thus Mary is free from the traditional feelings for things like marriage, family, love and children. That way she is emotionally independent. She is also efficient, dominating and strong-willed. But she is yet not completely free. She resents marriage, yet remains single only until 'society made her get married'. She starts worrying when once she overhears her friends commenting on her single status and starts unconsciously searching for a husband. She marries Dick Turner, a poor farmer merely because she cares for the society and its judgment. As their marriage has no strong base of mutual love, it turns out to be a failure.

Mary is not independent in her ideas about, and attitude towards, the Black. She suffers because of her deep-rooted racial prejudices shaped in her mind, by her White Colonial society. She dismisses her black servants one after the other and remains without any

servant. When her husband falls ill she takes over the running of the farm and management of the natives. She lashes a native across the face and this unintended act is nothing but a sudden explosion of her hatred for the black. As the author shows, this infliction of wound establishes an unbreakable bond between Mary and Moses, the black man. She always 'recognizes' him by his scar, in defiance with the White law which dictates that one Black man looks like another to a White woman. Again it is assumed that a White person should never be afraid of a black man. Mary is scared of Moses because she unconsciously feels that he may react, strike back and avenge his oppression. She was unable to treat this servant as she had treated all others, for, always at the back of her mind, was that moment of fear she had known just after she had hit him and thought he would attack her. Further, Mary had a 'dark attraction' for Moses, which, she would 'die rather than acknowledge it'. Tormented by such unconscious feelings that work contradictory to her conscious being, Mary holds herself like a "taut-drawn thread, stretched between two immovable weights" - that was how she felt, as if she were poised, a battle ground for two contending forces. Yet what the forces were, and how she contained them, she could not have said."

These contending forces are, on the one hand, the racist system which demands that she should remain dominant over the servant ignoring his humanity, and on the other hand the force of attraction which tempts her to recognize the human being in Moses and to submit emotionally and physically, to his greater strength of character and body. Thus

Mary's 'dark attraction' for Moses of which she is quite unconscious, is the result of her that long-hidden desire to be dominated.

On the face of it the novel appears to be dealing with the racial problem rather than with the problems of women. But women's problem here is associated with the racial issue; there is an affinity between these two oppressed groups. As for the central character in the novel, each scene and character serves to emphasize the problems of Mary who stands for all modern sensitive white women in South Africa. The desert for instance, which is so beautifully and realistically pictured, is mainly to emphasize Mary's miseries.

A person. He represents Mary's 'shadow' - the repressed and alien side of her press for the maacters, they are all sketched in relation to Mary's chin character. Dick's character stands as a symbol of her destiny, of the 'grey misery' of her life. The character of Moses is brought out not as human being, but as a part of a nightmare in which Mary is swallowed up. He is rather a force imposing on her weak mind, than atonality that is in opposition to those aspects which she can acknowledge consciously. He is Mary's alter-ego; also the 'darker' side of her being which she has to recognize and accept in order to gain a complete understanding of her own psyche. This is brought forth through the device of Mary's dreams which are important indicators of her unconscious mind.

At the end of her life Mary understands, through madness, the fragmented state of her own consciousness and faces the most feared and hated aspect of her self- the 'evil' in her.

By achieving this knowledge she is able to recognize her identity in its fullness, to shed her former attitudes. She also realizes that she has relied on other people to set the pattern of her life, that she has given over moral as well as personal responsibilities to others. At this moment of moral awakening her instinct is toward connection and reconciliation. The very second before her murder Mary it seems, has effected a change; *her death* is infused with dignity by virtue of her hard won awakening and expansion of

consciousness. She transcends the state of ignorance that had made her an accomplice in the system of racial injustice. She also achieves a knowledge of ‘the darker aspects’ of her personality and achieves ‘individuation’ or wholeness of self.

It is this achievement that gives Mary a heroic stature, gives her victory over the inherent duality in her being and attainment of integrity. It is this achievement that makes her a ‘new woman’ in the real sense of the term.

**Works Cited:**

- 1 Lessing Doris ; The Grass is Singing ( 1950;England:Penguin Books Ltd.,1961).

All subsequent references to the novel (G.S) are to this edition.