

GENDER BIAS AND DESTITUTION: A MARXIST FEMINIST INTERVENTION IN DORIS LESSING'S THE GRASS IS SINGING

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Abstract

The article focuses on the gender and financial crisis of the white women who live in the rural areas of Southern Africa. After the emergence of post-colonialism in literature and other fields, writers began to question and break the rules against the colonial countries. Many contemporary writers from Africa and Asian countries produce literary works that condemn racial discrimination and the ill-treatment against the natives. But in this novel *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing brings out the sad reality of the whites who live in poverty in an alien nation.

Quite specifically, Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* can be read in relation with a Marxist feminist perspective. "Marxist feminism is feminism focused on investigating and explaining the ways in which women are oppressed through systems of capitalism and private property" (119) This perception can draw our sympathy towards Mary, one of the major characters of the novel and it exposes how a white woman is being suppressed physically, mentally and economically. The novel explores the realistic situation that how middle-class white people strive hard to maintain their dignity and pride in front of the natives. Moreover, the novelist also discloses about the gender inequality that was prevailing among the white society in South Africa. In this article, the term "gender bias" actually deals with the suppression of a white woman both by the colonizer and colonized.

The Grass is Singing is a text which actually goes against the general assumption on an African society. The novel shows us clearly that how a white woman is easily drawn to death because of her poor economical condition and the gender oppression that she has been facing throughout her life.

Keywords: Marxist, feminism, economical, gender, oppression

Doris Lessing was one of the greatest British novelists. She was also a poet, playwright, biographer and short story writer. Though she was born in Iran and lived her earlier life in colonial parts of southern Africa, herself and her family was able to lead the British lifestyle. She started her writing career after her marriage. Her novels include *The Grass is Singing* (1950), the sequence of five novels collectively called *Children of Violence* (1952-69), *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and five novels collectively known as *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979-1983). She was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in the year 2007.

When we read this novel *The Grass is Singing*, we are able to identify the life struggle of Lessing as well and so she was able to bring out the sufferings of white people in Rhodesia very realistically. The main objective of this article is to sort out the problems of a white woman who is economically suppressed because of her husband's faults and the class-complex that she faces because of neighbourhood whites. In the year 1925, the family moved to the British Colony of Southern Rhodesia to farm maize and other crops on about 1000 acres of bush that Lessing's father had bought. In the rough environment, Lessing's mom aspired to lead a rich lifestyle but it would have been possible if they were really wealthy. But in reality, they were short of money and their farm delivered a little income. All these things were reflected in this novel, *The Grass is Singing* that deeply reflects the economical and psychological afflictions of the whites.

The novel begins with a newspaper clipping about the death of Mary Turner, a white woman, killed off by her black servant Moses for money. The news actually acts like an omen for other white people living in that African setting. After looking at the article, people behave as if the murder was very much expected. The bulk of the novel is a flashback of Mary Turner's life up to her murder at the hand of Moses in the last chapter.

Mary has a content life as a single white Rhodesian. She has a fine job, numerous friends, and values her independence. Nevertheless, after overhearing an insulting remark at a party about her spinsterhood she resolves to marry. After a brief courtship, she marries Dick Turner, a white farmer struggling to make his farm profitable. She moves with him to his farm and runs the household, while Dick manages the labour of the farm. Dick and Mary are somewhat cold and distant from each other but are committed to their marriage. They live together a life stalled in poverty. When Dick gets sick Mary takes over the management of the farm and rages at the incompetence of her husband's farm practice. To Mary, the farm exists only to make money, while Dick goes about farming in a more idealistic way.

Their life together is solitary and it is because of their poverty, Dick refuses to give Mary a child. They do not attend social events, yet are a great topic of interest among their neighbours. Mary feels an intimate connection with the nature around her, though being in general rather than with the people around her. Mary is an ardent racist, believing that whites should be masters over the native blacks. Dick and Mary both often complain about the lack of work ethic among the natives that work on their farm. While Dick is rarely cruel to the workers that work for them, Mary is quite cruel. She sees herself as their master and superior. She shows contempt for the natives and finds them disgusting and animal-like. Mary is cross, queenly, and overtly hostile to the many house servants she has over the years. When Mary oversees the farm labour she is much more repressive than Dick had ever been. She lets them work harder, reduces their break time, and arbitrarily takes money from their pay. Her hatred of natives result in her whipping the face of a worker because he speaks to her in English, telling her he stopped work for a drink of water.

This worker, named Moses, comes to be a very important person in Mary's life when he becomes a servant in the house. Mary does not fear her servant Moses but feels disgust and repugnance towards him. Often Mary does all she can to avoid having any social proximity with him. After many years living on the farm together, Dick and Mary are seen to be in a condition of deterioration. Mary often goes through spells of depression. In her frailty, Mary ends up relying more and more on Moses. As Mary becomes weaker, she finds herself feeling endearment towards Moses.

On a rare visit from their neighbour, Slatter, Mary is seen being carelessly and thoughtlessly kind to Moses. This enrages Slatter and he demands that Mary not be allowed to live with that worker as a house servant. Slatter sees himself as defending the values and integrity of the white community. Slatter uses his charisma and influence to persuade Dick to give up ownership of his farm and go on a vacation with his wife. This vacation is to be a sort of convalescence for them. Dick spends his last month on his farm with Tony, who has been hired by Slatter to take over the running of the farm.

Tony has good intentions and is very superficially cultured, but he finds himself having to adapt to the racism of the white community. One day Tony sees Moses dressing Mary and is surprised and somewhat amazed by Mary's breaking of the 'colour bar'. The book closes with Mary's death at the hand of Moses. Mary is expecting his arrival and is aware of her imminent death. Moses does not run from the scene as he originally intends but waits a short distance away for the arrival of the police.

The novel clearly brings out that how a woman is completely drained out of the pitiable economical condition rather than the man of the house. In this novel, it is Mary, the major character of the novel tries her utmost to balance the economical condition of the house in spite of Dick's continuous failures. On the other hand, the external patriarchal materialistic pressure in the form of Charlie Slatter pushes her into depression. This is what makes a rift between Mary and Mrs. Slatter in spite of the kind and good nature those Mrs. Slatter posses. Mrs. Satter was a kindly soul, and sorry for Mary who had married a good-for-nothing like Dick. ...But she remembered only too well the sufferings and humiliations of poverty. She looked at Mary with

real tenderness, remembering her own past, and was prepared to make friends. But Mary was stiff with resentment...

The Grass is singing by Doris Lessing (76-77)

This economical crisis creates inferiority within her that makes her to stay hostile. It was again when the independency of Mary was in a questionable stage, when Dick has been indirectly forcing her to give birth to a child. Though in the novel, we cannot find his compulsion directly, but we can come across the primary intention of Dick's marriage which is have a child of his own. Christine Delphy argues that the material basis of women's oppression, "lies not in capitalist but in patriarchal relations of production" (693). Delphy have formulated the materialist analysis of patriarchy, stressing social rather than biological relations.

Throughout the novel, we can notice materialistic approach of Mary is narrowed whereas the approach of Dick is idealistic. It is because of the unbearable external pressures that had been faced by Mary as a woman. During the illness of Dick, when Mary was about to look after the farm she was not able to hold control over the natives. This actually seems to be an indirect submissiveness that happened because of the disappointing economical status of the Turners'. When such things happen, the ardent racism and inferior economical status of Mary mixes together and results in psychological trauma. Dick also thinks that controlling natives in the farm is not a woman's job, which can be seen as repulsion against Mary's authority. Michele Barrett points out that, "Marxist feminism must explore the relations between the organization of sexuality, domestic production... and historical changes in the mode of production and systems of appropriation and exploitation." Such an approach will stress the "relations between capitalism and oppression of women." (692)

Mary is pushed again to an embarrassing situation when she was unable to pay the doctor fees when Dick fell ill. "Pay me when you can afford it'. She was miserable with frustrated pride; but let it go- they literally did not have the money." (108) when he fell ill for the second time, she again wrote a letter to the Slatters in order to bring a doctor to treat his illness. Everytime she wrote a letter, it is because they cannot to pay for a telephone. As Dick was continuously failing in all his investments on crops, Mary began to lose hope and she sacrificed many little things and amusements that a woman needs to enjoy in her life. "A poverty that allows a tiny margin for spending, but which is shadowed always by a weight of debt that nags like a conscience, is worse than starvation itself." (123)

Mary was suppressed by the accusation of Dick when there was a fail in the growth of tobacco. Dick showed his utmost hostility when Mary went against his idea of planting tobaccos, that he considered as an 'inhuman crop'. "Dick became morose and irritable, with the strain, Mary curiously silent." (130) When Moses, the new houseboy entered the house, Mary was much more frightened and worried because of the unwanted early encounter with him. But still she bear everything because of Dick's financial crisis as he could not pay high to other natives who demanded a huge amount as salary. "I can't afford to buy niggers at five pounds a head any longer. I have to rely on voluntary labour. And it just isn't coming any more. It's partly your fault. You lost me twenty of my best boys, and they'll never come back." (138) She was absolutely obsessed with the fear for Dick as well as the native. This results in the psychological imbalance of Mary, that later ends up in her illness.

Every time, the financial burden on Mary either made her physically or mentally out of control. When Moses tells Mary that he is about to leave from this work, Mary lost her control and sobbed in front of him which is considered to be a weakness. "It was like a nightmare where is one powerless against horror..." (151) from then, the attitude and behavior of Moses towards Mary started taking a new shape which seems to be very colloquial and easy. "And in the attitude of Moses, in the way he moved or spoke, with that easy, confident, bullying insolence,... Only he

was powerful and sure of himself, and she was undermined with fear, by her terrible dream-filled nights, her obsession.” (167)

Hence, the whole article places the idea of Marxist feminism as the central theme and shows how a white woman is suppressed by financial crisis and gender inequalities both by the internal and external forces, both by the colonizer and the colonized. The author also places autobiographical elements in order to bring the sad reality of the whites especially women who are living in colonies.

References

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