

# DORIS LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING*: AN APOLOGY OF THE RHODESIAN SOCIETY AS A POSTCOLONIAL PSYCHO-SOCIAL DRAMA<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Doris Lessing, one of the most significant postcolonial writers, made her debut as a novelist with *The Grass Is Singing* (1950). The novel examines the relationship between Mary Turner, a white farmer's wife, and her black African servant in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) during the 1940s. The novel does not only deal with racial politics between whites and blacks, but also explores feminist issues. Moreover, the description of Mary Turner merits closer examination on account of Lessing's incomparable depictions of the female psyche in the midst of restrictions imposed by gender, race and class. Core themes of the novel include a failed marriage, the sexual obsessions mainly on the part of whites, and the fear of black power and revenge which still pervade today while the British Colonial past is only a memory.

**Key words:** Rhodesia, feminism, racism, colonialism, postcolonial, social issues.

**Título en Español:** *The Grass Is Singing* de Doris Lessing: una apología de la sociedad de Rodesia como drama postcolonial psicosocial

**Resumen:** Una de las escritoras poscoloniales más relevantes, Doris Lessing, comenzó su carrera como novelista con *The Grass Is Singing* (1950). La novela examina la relación entre María Turner, esposa de un granjero blanco y su sirviente negro africano en Rodesia, actual Zimbabwe, durante la década de los años 40 del pasado siglo. La novela no sólo trata de la política racial entre blancos y negros, sino también explora temas feministas. La descripción que Lessing nos proporciona de Mary Turner aporta una perspectiva única, un examen detenido de la psique femenina en medio de situaciones de raza, sexo y problemática social. Los motivos internos de la novela nos muestran una temática en torno a un matrimonio fracasado, la obsesión por la sexualidad, mayoritariamente por parte de los blancos, y el miedo al poder negro y a la venganza; algo todavía muy válido en la actualidad cuando el pasado colonial británico sólo permanece como un legado.

**Palabras clave:** Rodesia, feminismo, racismo, colonialismo, postcolonialismo, temas sociales.

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<sup>1</sup> Date of reception: 26/08/2013

Date of acceptance: 21/11/2013

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The plot of *The Grass Is Singing* is relatively simple. We are told at the beginning that Mary Turner, the wife of a farmer, has been killed by a house boy, that the murderer is caught, and that he admitted the crime. After extensively telling of the distress, even nervous breakdown, of the husband, Dick, Lessing stresses the responses of two others, Charlie Slatter, a neighbour, and Tony Masrton, an utopian twenty-year-old and recent newcomer from England who had been working in Turner plantation for only a short time.

Following this initial chapter, Lessing goes back to Mary Turner's childhood, and tells of a woman's gradual acceptance of an isolated, unmarried life, of her desperate acceptance of marriage at the age of thirty, of her subsequent adjustment to life on a desolate and unprofitable farm, her brutal treatment of natives, the complete mental and economic deterioration both she and her husband experience, the sale of the family business, and her final murder.

At the heart of *The Grass Is Singing* is the whirlwind of race, the struggle that the female psyche of Mary Turner faces in accepting the blacks as human beings, not as equals, but merely as human. To this end various unwritten laws of colonial Africa that are frequently mentioned in the novel serve as convenient support for an arrogant kind of exclusivism. So rigid were the laws regarding black-white contact that a black man could not even ride the same car as the corpse of a white man: one could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she was dead, and murdered by him (1950: 28). Thus the black becomes the constant, the invariable, the epitome of crime and violence (29); with the whites having behind them the police, the tribunals, the prisons, all the locals can strive is some more patience. Even the black police men are not permitted to touch a white man in the pursuit of their duties (13). As a whole, the whites loathe [the natives] to the point of neurosis (92) which ultimately causes the murder of the white lady, Mary.

The whites are so certain about the necessity and rightness of their treatment of the blacks that newcomers to the country are immediately made aware of the difference between England and Rhodesia (20-21). Tony Marston at first thought only in such

abstractions (226), holding “the conventionally ‘progressive’ ideas about colour, the superficial progressive of the idealist that seldom survives a conflict with self-interest” (226). Hence he frequently started discussion with established white settlers on miscegenation, only to have his “progressiveness” deliciously flattered by this evidence of white ruling class hypocrisy (230). Following Mary’s murder, he “Would do his best to forget the knowledge, for to live with colour bar in all its nuances and implications means closing one’s mind to many things, if one intends to remain an accepted member of society” (30).

Tony soon realizes that “Moses would be hanged in any case, for “he had committed a murder, that fact remained. Did he intend to go on fighting in the dark for the sake of a principle? And if so, which principle?” (31). It is thus no surprise that Marston is a broken man. Although we are not told what Marston’s behaviour henceforth is like, we can predict fairly safely, on the basis of Lessing’s discussion on Africa on her return visit, what is reasonable to take place:

Time again it was said to me, either jubilantly or with regret, “If you want to see the natives badly treated, then you should see the people just out from Britain: they are worse than anyone, much worse than the old Rhodesians.” And “We thought that a big influx of immigrants from Britain would strengthen liberal opinion, but not a bit of it. (95)

Thus Marston’s understanding of the situation depicted in the novel is for him to see:

“White civilization” fighting to defend itself ... 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 for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes and nothing can save it. (30)

However, Mary Turner, as a native Southern Rhodesian, has none of this analytical perspective on the racial problem. Before she came to Dick Turner's farm, she had never had any direct contact with natives, but had developed a code of behaviour toward them just as the native had toward her. This established code seems to be a further indication of the natives' nature. Mary, of course, had previously known that natives were getting rude but it meant nothing to her. Now though she is trying to teach the natives about the dignity of work (140) she hates their physical vitality and suggestion of raw fertility and virility.

The subjection of the feminine self starts when Mary begins fearing Moses, the native house boy, from the outset of his stay in the house (174-75), and when gradually but inexorably Moses becomes Mary's master in ways she dare not admit consciously to herself. When she breaks down emotionally (185), she is aware of Moses' presence, and before long realizes that a new relationship between them is taking place. This bizarre subjection was so prevailing that:

She felt helplessly in his power. Yet there was no reason why she should. Never ceasing for one moment to be conscious of his presence about the house, or standing silently at the back against the wall in the sun, her feeling was one of a strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even-though this she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledge – of some dark attraction. It was as though the act of weeping before him had been an act of resignation of her authority; and he had refused to hand it back. Several times the quick rebukes had come to her lips, and she had seen him look at her deliberately, not accepting it, but challenging her. Only once, when he had really forgotten to do something and was in the wrong, had he worn his old attitude of black submissiveness. Then he accepted, because he was at fault. And now she begins to avoid him. ... And she was held in balance, not knowing what this new tension was that she could not break down. (190-91)

Moses, stands as a representative of the blacks as well as a symbol of patriarchal society creates a horror in the feminine psyche and starts calling Mary "madame" instead of the usual "miss", but "almost he was never disrespectful, he forced her, now to treat her a human being" (192). He even dares to touch her:

He put out his hand reluctantly, loathes to touch her, the sacrosanct white woman, and pushed her by shoulder; she felt her gently propelled across the room towards the bedroom. It was like a nightmare where one is powerless against horror: the touch of this black man's hand on her shoulder filled her with nausea; she had never, not once in her whole life, touched the flesh of a native. (186)

A new relationship between them is born; the power this new relationship reflects becomes increasingly malevolent, and repeatedly in the final pages of the novel, Moses' very presence in the house leads Charlie, Dick, and especially Tony to express fear of Moses' arrogant behaviour and the possibility of violence occurring. Moses knows that Tony is the only white with whom he must contend, for he knows Dick had been defeated long before. Rather than to escape, though, Moses ponders the house and Mary's body after the murder:

And this was his final moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent. ... Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his compounded with satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say. (255-56)

Thus Moses achieves his revenge. He considers Mary as a representative of the whites. Yet ironically while protesting the White or colonial subjection, he has subjected somebody from the opposite sex. He dares to target a masculine partner and Mary becomes the victim. He chooses Mary not only because she is white, but also because she is female, supposedly the weaker sex. While doing so, Moses allows the white in power to show him as a practical example that the black are not fit to be treated as human, since the black man ... will thief, rape, murder, if given a half chance (29).

The very same treatment she receives from her husband makes her aware of the failure of their relationship. She sometimes cannot tolerate him realizing that Dick expects a great deal from her: "You expect a lot from me, don't you?" On the brink of disaster, she pulled herself up, but could not stop completely, and after a hesitation went

on, 'You expect such a lot! You expect me to live like a pokey little place of yours'" (95). Sometimes with an uncertain struggle to create her feminine individuality, she protests like a true feminist. Failing to abide Dick, she speaks "In a new voice for her, a voice she had never used before her life. ... It was not the voice of Mary, the individual ... but the voice of the suffering female, who wanted to show her husband she just would not be treated like that" (96).

Throughout her life Mary had been isolated, both in fact and in feeling, and this isolation had created in her a feeling of non-involvement in the lives and feelings of others that she calls "freedom". This "freedom", however, is not at all akin to the sense in which this term is used by the feminists and the female protagonists of Lessing's later fictions, for the "freedom" Mary Turner claims for herself is considerably less viable and carefully reasoned than that of the feminists or Lessing's later central characters. Her real freedom, she believes, comes only after her parents' death, for then she is unhindered from her personal pursuit, although even then her innate fear of involvement can be seen; for although she is "free", she is not free at this time to enter into others' lives.

Traditionally, marriage is considered to be the final destiny for women. Mary, who is different from Martha in *Children of Violence Series*, does not experience much parental restriction, although she is almost forced into marriage by society. She had an unhappy and disturbing childhood because of her drunkard father who would constantly torture her mother. She spent the most part of her girlhood in a boarding school; free from any subservience, but then a turning point comes in her life when she overhears her intimate friends discussing her age and marriage. She is horrified to hear them commenting that there is "something missing somewhere" (42) in her, just because she, not yet thirty, is still unwedded.

This little incident leaves a profound impact on Mary. She was thrown completely off her balance because some gossiping women had said she ought to get married (46). The tension in her life as a single woman begins here, and she is made to search hysterically for a husband, despite her intense aversion for marriage. She comes

across a widower of fifty-five with half-grown children. His proposal is unthinkingly accepted by Mary, but once when that man tries to kiss her, she comes out from the house into the night and weeps bitterly. This incident becomes the talk of the town. At that crisis, she comes across Dick Turner, an ambitious farmer whom she meets by chance at the cinema and decides to marry, despite their different backgrounds, tastes and ambitions. The only common point between the two is that both of them are eager to marry.

The marriage, however, turns out to be a failure as Mary leaves her home and considers the life of a single woman and as a short of consequence she is not taken back in her office as she has lost most of her attractiveness. Roberta Rubenstein rightly observes that *The Grass is Singing* “concerns about social, economic and political structures, with being female in a conventional man’s world” (Rubenstein 1979: 17). Dick follows Mary and takes her back to his home. However, Mary fails to return to her independent and tension-free past which she had enjoyed before marriage.

Even after her marriage, she still attempts to emulate the vague feminism she inherited from her mother:

The women who marry Dick learn sooner or later that there are two things they can do: they can drive themselves mad, tear themselves into pieces in storms of futile anger and rebellion; or they can hold themselves tight and go bitter. Mary with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable. (Lessing 1950: 110)

The sarcasm of Mary’s condition, as the prior quotation suggests, is that she begins her exile on the farm completely embittered, only in the last years before her death rebelling against her husband and her class and race, and finally being torn apart as a consequence of her unwise behaviour.

Mary’s unwillingness to enter fully into the realm of the personal is clear in her attitude toward and reaction against sexuality. Although romantic at weddings, she throughout her life feels a “profound distaste for sex. ... There had been little privacy in

her home and there were things that she did not care to remember; she had taken good care to forget them years ago" (46). When she does wed Dick, she feels, following her deflowering on the wedding night, that:

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. Women have an extraordinary ability to withdraw from sexual relationship, to immunize themselves against it, in such a way that their men can be left feeling let down and insulted without having anything tangible to complain of. Mary did not have to learn this, because it was natural to her, and because she had expected nothing in the first place. (66-67)

But although Mary finds the idea of normal sexual relations with Dick repulsive, both her subconscious, expressed through dreams and her psychotic state towards the end of her life demonstrate the extent to which an abnormal or unusual sexual manifestation is desired.

Loneliness, suffering and frustration in marriage sometimes cause disintegration and make some women even schizophrenic as Mary in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*. The novel is a poignant portrayal of Mary's disintegration and death because of her unhappy marriage. Mary, an independent, poised and amiable woman who disdains the very idea of marriage, is hastened into wedlock, after the malicious remarks made by her own friends who conform to the view that marriage is "the sole justification of her (a woman's) existence" (de Beauvoir 1952: 446). In Mary's case, it is not the enviousness, jealousy or cruelty of a man but mismatching which is responsible for the tragedy. After a hurried courtship, before they could understand and know the likes and dislikes of each other, Mary marries Dick who also needs her solely to fight his own loneliness. Loneliness is the only common point between the two, who have otherwise different pasts, different experiences and different backgrounds. While Mary "loved the town, felt safe there" (Lessing 1950: 46), Dick detests the town-culture. Being a countryman, he loves spending most of his time on his homestead. After marriage also,



Dick remains busy in his farm work going in the morning, returning late in the evening and retiring to bed immediately after supper.

The sexual relationship of Mary and Dick is not very satisfactory from the beginning. While Dick unpurposely makes her a “sexual object by idealizing her, Mary can only accept him when he approaches her passively. Then falling back to him in a victim-like way expecting abuse and intrusion, she was comforted to find she felt nothing” (Rubenstein 1979: 19). Thereby sex does not even draw them any closer, rather it divides them. Mary realizes that motherhood can give her some happiness and fulfilment, and at one stage she talks to Dick about having a child but Dick refuses on account of his poverty, which in fact is caused largely by his own failures and stubbornness. Now Mary tries to find meaning in her life by sewing, stitching and mending as if “fine embroidery would save her life” (Lessing 1950: 65). The gulf between the two, however, keeps on widening and in their lonely home “they were stunned, unfulfilled figures” (Sarvan 1979: 537). Marriage closes doors for any career as well. The woman who was once admired and loved by the society is disqualified because of her sloppy appearance and unpolished manners. She comes back and ultimately resigns herself to the traditional role of a woman.

Lessing makes her *The Grass Is Singing* a study of the decay of a marriage between ill-matched couples who live on a poverty-stricken, incompetently managed farm on the Rhodesian veldt. The sexlessness of their marriage is a parallel to the impotence of Sir Clifford Chatterly, but it has its roots in poverty and deprivation rather than in industrialism and false liberalism. The black houseboy who becomes the Mellors intruding on this relationship is ambiguously regarded by the white woman. He brings destruction instead of rebirth; it is not destruction of a cleansing Lawrentian kind, but the violent culmination of a long, demoralizing process. Yet the peculiar compulsion which the houseboy exerts over the white woman is intensely Lawrentian; and the scene in which the woman accidentally comes upon him when he is washing himself is clearly derived from Lady Chatter. The breaking of the “formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant” by the “personal relation” – against all the racial instincts of the women – is also reminiscent of the way in which Mellors, simply by being what he is,

breaks through the class barrier which Connie instinctively raises between them (Draper 1964: 172-173).

Lessing describes the book as being a “very driven book, I mean, there isn’t much ‘hope’ in it.” She says further that there isn’t any advance from Moses to a native leader quoted in *The Golden Notebook*, Tom Mathlong: “forgive me, but why should there be?” Similarly there is no real parallel between Mary Turner and Doris Lessing’s other female protagonists, all of whom do achieve a certain degree of “freedom” in their lives, and who explore meaningfully the various “commitments” open to them in the modern world. Mary Turner, by contrast, denies herself such commitments, thus making of her life a sterile, empty existence, symbolized not only by her childlessness but also by the wasteland in which she lives.

Doris Lessing’s strength lies in the exploration of psychological conflicts within individuals in the book. For instance, merely knowing that Moses is the murderer says nothing about the forces at work in and on him that lead him to commit murder. Lessing’s inexorable chronicling of the injustices and humiliations and dehumanized treatments received by the natives enables us to see the “why” behind the killing, just as her persistent probing into Mary Turner’s thinking and reactions enables us to see the unthinking mentality of an entire way of life laid bare. Even though the whites who survive Mary see her death as an example to support their blind thinking about the blacks, to the reader the book takes on more of an allegorical or mythical quality, on a very limited scale, suggesting to us that such persistent refusal to accept the blacks as fully human only results in genocide.

That is why Lessing’s portrayal of Mary Turner, may seem two-dimensional at times, demanding a closer examination because of the unique perspective Lessing brings to bear on the female psyche. Mary Turner is far less complicated than her protagonists in the *Children of Violence* series and *The Golden Notebook*, but Mary shares with them a persistent critical attitude and analysis, an obsessive concern about female sexuality, a self-conscious concern about freedom in an essentially masculine world, and a slight awareness, abortive though it may seem in comparison with the later

novels, with the racial dichotomy existing in colonial Africa. As a first novel, the book certainly contains examples of thinking and technique that a more experienced writer, such as Lessing herself in some recent years, would prefer to change, but it is regardless an appreciably unique first novel, particularly because it contains within itself the seeds of ideas explored more openly and fully in the series of novels about Martha Quest and *The Golden Notebook*.

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