

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 3 March 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

Shahara Begum, M.A.
Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.



Abstract

Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing* is the story of Mary Turner who was a victim of conflicting forces within herself set up by a few casual, overheard

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 3 March 2012

Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

words as well as victim of the male dominated society. Similar kind of victimization can also be traced into Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* where the story ends with the disastrous murder of the social welfare officer, Ila Das.

Through death the female characters are actually made silent forever. They can be turned into potential threat to the patriarchal society. Therefore, eternal silence is necessary for the sake of male society.

Ila Das's talk of change and social reform was a threat to the old and oppressive patriarchal order. So, she needs to be silenced through violence, rape and bloodshed. Mary is unable to adapt to the harshness of the life she has chosen. She breaks unwritten societal rules. She cannot reconcile her true feelings with what she has been taught to feel. Her avoidance alienates her from everybody. She is helpless, and gradually the sensation of Mary's psychosis becomes intense and striking, and finally, she was brutally murdered by a Negro servant. Both the characters are innocent victims as they had done no crime. But they became a threat to the male society by shaking off the role society determined for them. As a result, they became victims of masculine power in the male ideological theatre.

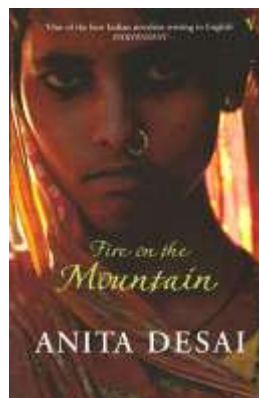
The Grass is Singing



Considered a significant writer of the post-world war II generation, Doris Lessing has explored many of the most significant ideologies and social issues of the twentieth century. Doris Lessing's first novel *The Grass is Singing* reveals the myriad ways that history and politics can determine the course of a person's life.

In common with many novels in the social realist tradition, this novel is not merely for art for art's sake. Lessing's two great concerns, the evil of colonialism and the evil of patriarchal societies in which men set rules and standards and women are subordinated, form the fundamental themes of this novel. The novel begins following Mary Turner's murder and Mary is despised in death by Charlie Slatter.

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*



Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 3 March 2012

Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

In Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* there is a death incident which shocks the readers as Ila Das, who is Nanda Kaul's childhood friend, is murdered. What is important to note is that both Mary Turner and Ila Das have suffered tremendous mental agony, and they die not natural deaths, rather they were brutally murdered by the male members of the society. They are the innocent victims at the hand of the patriarchal society and they are doomed so perversely only because they are women.

A Picture of the Plight of Female Characters

In these novels we get a picture of the plight of female characters. They are unable to grow as complete human beings though they had a vision of a better life.

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* focused on three women and their oppressed life. They always depend on each other for their existence. Nanda Kaul wants the attention of Raka because she is very much lonely as she has renounced her entire world and has come to spend her remaining days in the peace of the Kasauli Mountain. Ila Das is also lonely but she has a keen sense of dignity. She too wants the help of Nanda for her existence. Raka is the dream come true, a dream which is created in a neurotic state of mind. She is the model for changing situation. When one feels totally entrapped one becomes a Raka. Withdrawn from the male dominated society all these three female characters set up a colony of their own, and ironically there too their life has to break its continuity by the interference of male power.

Mary in *The Grass is Singing*

In *The Grass is Singing*, Mary Turner grows to be an independent young woman after her family struggles with poverty in her childhood. She gets an office job and lives in a girls' hostel without having any romantic relationship. She was content

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 3 March 2012

Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

until she overhears her friends commenting upon her age, how she has not married and her wearing too youthful dresses. The comments which haunt throughout her life:

That little incident, apparently so unimportant, which would have had no effect on a person who had the faintest idea of the kind of world she lived in, had a profound effect on Mary. She, who had never had time to think of herself, took to sitting in her room for hours at a time, wondering: 'why did they say those things? What is the matter with me? What did they mean when they said that I am *not like that*? (Lessing, 49)

Her world which she has made after a long struggle is now off-balanced. The incident leads her to change herself as well as to look for a husband. She soon marries a struggling farmer, Dick Turner and they leave the city to lead a life of isolation and poverty in the village farm. Mary Turner is actually forced into marriage effectively by the weight of social expectations and traditions. She never loves her husband, but she is at least initially glad to have one, as it makes her 'normal'.

Ila Das in *Fire in the Mountain*

Ila Das in the novel *Fire on the Mountain* represents everything that is 'awkward and old-fashioned' in the society. Unlike Mary Turner, she did not submit to the traditional idea of getting married. She is more active than Mary. Ila Das is 'old-fashioned' in her traits and she lacks refinement which may be the reason of the misfortunes of her past life. When she was young her father died and her mother was invalid for a long time. Moreover, her brothers who deprived her of the family property inherited the family fortune and wasted it.

The Role of Childhood

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 3 March 2012

Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

According to Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, childhood is the most important period of all human beings and abnormal behavior is the result of the traumas of childhood. We see it evident in both the characters who had a traumatic past with their family which created something abnormal in their behavior. In the case of Ila we can assume that something is wrong with her when she is depicted as ‘proceeding towards Carignano with her uneven, rushing step, in her ancient white court shoes, prodding the tip of her great brown umbrella into the dust with an air of faked determination’. (Desai, 107)

After the marriage with Dick, Mary is engaged in a losing battle to hold on to her own identity. The struggle becomes too much for her and she suffers psychologically and physically– “what sort of woman had Mary Turner been, before she came to this farm and had been driven slowly off balance by heat and loneliness and poverty?”(Lessing, 33) This psychological depression and the suffering is common to female characters. For example, in Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon* we get another unconventional woman of her trait, Pilate Dead who is also killed at the end of the novel by a male character named– Guitar Bains. These psychological back logs drive womanhood to the forced ‘madness’. It is imposed by the society on them which in the long run turns them into ‘social outcasts’.

Difference between Ila Das and Mary Turner

But there is a marked difference between Ila Das and Mary Turner, one works as an active agent in the society whereas the other is merged into passivity and obsessed with the thought of uncanny fear. Ila has to struggle a lot to establish herself as a social welfare officer and finds herself fighting a lonely battle against a mindless multitude. But she does not make any compromise. Though she is aware of the dire

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 3 March 2012

Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

consequences that she will be forced to encounter, she remains faithful to her cause. She succeeds in stopping several child marriages, the prominent one being the marriage of Preet Singh's seven year old daughter. Finally, she pays a dear price for her convictions and refusals to compromise. She is raped and brutally murdered by Preet Singh who has been dying for revenge. Though she meets a tragic end she has made her existence significant by exhibiting courage and determination. Though she loses her chastity and life in the process of her struggle against the oddities of life, her life has become meaningful by virtue of the fact that she chooses a worthy cause, fights for it and sacrifices herself in trying to accomplish her task. Ila Das is the embodiment of the 'existential' predicament where alienation, quest and conflict are at the core of human tragedy. Ila Das says "I am always alone. I am never afraid" (Desai, 138) which establishes her as a strong-willed person.

Mary Turner is a self-confident, independent young woman who becomes the depressed, frustrated wife of an ineffectual, unsuccessful farmer. Little by little the ennui of years on the farm work inject into her despair as a slow poison until the fateful arrival of an enigmatic and virile black servant, Moses. Locked in anguish, Mary and Moses— master and slave, are trapped in a web of mounting attraction and repulsion. These mixed dispositions cause confusion for both of them, and at last Moses, unable to stomach her humiliation of him, kills her. Mary like Ila could also sense the impending death but her tragedy is even greater, there is no redemption. It is noteworthy that both Ila Das and Mary Turner were killed by the male figures who were socially inferior to them, one is an uneducated village rogue and another is a Black servant.

The Characteristic of Passivity

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 3 March 2012

Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

Passivity is a kind of identity artificially created for women by the society and imposed on them, and subsequently the women tend to submit to it. Through this passivity depression arises and it makes Mary feel low in spirit. Then she is obsessed with the thought of marriage. Later on she is possessed by the things she hates, for example, dust, natives etc. At last we see her execution when she is murdered by the native. It is this projection of women which made feminist theorist Judith Fetterley to remark, “the sacrificial scapegoat is the woman/wife and the cleansed survivor is the husband/male.” (Fetterly-562)

Gradual Progress

The Grass is Singing is a tale of a gradual progress of a lady’s journey to life-having maturity, facing reality, coming out of the world of illusion and imagination and at last meeting the tragic end. The title of the book is taken from T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Wasteland*. Here we see a life of woman who wants to do this and that but finally she cannot do anything. She is living the life of a caged bird and cannot take breath properly. From feminist point of view, it is the male society which takes life out of her. It is this patriarchal society which imposes prefixed roles on women according to its wish. As Mary Turner turns to be a misfit in the society and cannot mantle her according to the desire of male society, she must die. Luce Irigaray in her essay “Commodities amongst Themselves” says:

The mother stands for phallic power; the child is always a little boy; the husband is a father-man. And the woman? She “doesn’t exist”. She adopts the disguise that she is told to put on. She acts out the role that is imposed on her. The only thing really required of her is that she keeps

intact the circulation of pretense by enveloping herself in femininity. (p. 575)

The Role of Anguish

Anguish which is related to both of the characters is the root cause of their sufferings. Mary gets no help from her husband, no loyalty from the servant, no friend to help her. Therefore, it is evident that she will gradually perish. Ila Das also suffers severely and longs for a friend, when she says to Nanda– “As if the past still existed here and I could simply come and visit it and have a cup of tea with it when I was tired of the present” (Desai, 132). But she also could not get any help from either her family members, or from her childhood friend, Nanda Kaul. This is indeed a lonely battle which Ila and Mary ought to fight alone.

In the conference of London Commonwealth Institute titled “Indian Women Writers”, Anita Desai points out, “women writers tend to place their emphasis differently from men, that their values are likely to differ,whereas a man is concerned with action, experience and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation” (p-68). This is evident in the writings of male writers, such as V. S. Naipaul’s novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* which deals with ‘action’ and ‘achievement’ whereas the novel *The Grass is Singing* or *Fire on the Mountain* deals with personal emotion and other psychological aspects. Elaine Showalter in her essay “A Literature of Their Own” says– “Women have had a literature of their own all along. The woman novelist, according to Vineta Colby, was ‘really neither single nor anomalous’, but she was also more than a ‘register and a spokesman for her age’ (Vineta, 1970). She was part of a tradition that had its origin before her age, and has carried on through our own.” (Showalter, 1993)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 3 March 2012

Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

Victims of Male Domination: Why This Female Victimization?

Mary Turner and Ila Das are victimized by the male dominated society although they have not committed any crime. Ila Das has a vision of to educate the society: human rights include the right of education which was related to Ila Das's campaign. She commits no crime but through her activities she in fact threatens the male dominated Indian society which is at stake by her mission. For the reason she is attacked and destroyed.

Female victimization is also prominently displayed in Mary Turner's character. She has committed no crime but as she cannot follow the code of the society, she should not survive. She is despised even after her death. She gets no sympathy though she is taken to extreme point of tolerance and power, finally she breaks down.

If we ask why female victimization happens, we can state that we always see the woman as a loving mother, as a caring sister and as a loyal wife. These are the roles which the society wants them to play and it is rather imposed on them and if they cannot tread on the path designed by the males then they are labeled as "outcasts" or "devils". For example, in *Hamlet*, we see Hamlet is accusing her mother for marrying another man and he forgets that his mother is a flesh and blood human being; therefore, she should have the choice to live her life in her own way. It is the male perspective which builds a life of a woman. As Judith Fetterley rightly points out, "Though one of the most persistent of literary stereotypes is the castrating bitch, the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women but the immasculation of women by men" (p-567).

It is the patriarchal society which decides the fate of women in the society. When women fail to perform the role in the society which is desired by the males, then

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 3 March 2012

Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

they must pay a dear price for it. As we have seen in *The Grass is Singing*, even the victims are capable of victimizing others for exam, Moses himself is a victim in the white society but he also can victimize another who is not a male but a female. It is the power circle in the society which gives power to the man to have an upper hand over the woman. The society is essentially made by and made for the male folks which only serves the purpose of them and make them more powerful.

Female victimization is a common picture all over the world as we get a snapshot of it in Anita Desai's Indian setting and Dorris Lessing's African setting. These are the common consequences in this world populated by both men and women but dominated by men only. But what is the result of this victimization? What men are getting out of it? The answer is related to politics indeed, that it empowers men, it gives them absolute power to make their position even stronger and thus perpetuate the long tale of oppression.

=====

References

- C. Sanga, Jaina (ed.): *South Asian Literature in English, An Encyclopedia*, London: Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Desai, Anita: *Fire on the Mountain*, Vintage, 1999.
- Eagleton, Mary (ed.): *Feminist Literary Theory*, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.
- Lessing, Doris: *The Grass is Singing*, Heinemann Publishers, 1988.
- Parker, Michael and Starkey, Roger (eds). *Post Colonial Literatures*, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1995.
- Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael (eds.): *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.
- Vineta, Colby: *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century*, New York: New York University Press, 1970.
- Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 3 March 2012
Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.
Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*

Shahara Begum, M.A.
shammitopy@yahoo.com

Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Khulna University
Khulna - 9208
Bangladesh
sarwar1186@yahoo.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 3 March 2012

Shahara Begum, M.A. and Md. Sarwar Jahan, M.Phil.

Victims without Crimes: Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*