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Marginalised Psyche

A Study of Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*

Dhanalakshmi A., M.A., M.Phil.



Doris Lessing

<http://i-m-sez.blogspot.com/2010/07/i-am-quoting-golden-notebook-by-doris.html>

Doris Lessing's Africa Background

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Winner of 2007 Nobel Prize for her varied contribution to literature, Doris Lessing is the most powerful and significant writer from Britain. Born of British parents in Persia, now Iran, her childhood has been shaped by mobility and varied experience. It is her experience in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) that shaped her as diverse writer. She is part and parcel of Africa and one cannot part her from it.

As Sharda Iyer aptly points out, “The Southern Rhodesian landscape, its people – both blacks and white settlers – its modern history and society, in the thick of which she spent most of her first thirty years are the subject-matter of most of her writings. Even after years in London, Africa has not ceased to inspire her. (2)

Doris’ parents’ psychological and financial struggle bruised her childhood. Though deprived of formal education she read extensively, “I read these classics; it was my education”, as she acknowledges later in one of her interviews. Her wide reading mainly consists of classics. In one of her non-fiction works she conveys her experience of reading classics as, “What did I read? The best – the classic of European and American Literature. One of the advantages of not being educated was that I didn’t have to waste time on the second best I could have been educated formally...I simply contracted out of the whole thing and educated myself!”

***The Grass Is Singing* – The First Novel**



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Doris Lessing published *The Grass Is Singing* after her arrival in England in 1950. She wrote it while she lived in Southern Rhodesia. Though a maiden novel it received raving reviews and comments. Iyer quotes The Daily Telegraph for the accolades it received. “A first novel of astonishing accomplishment – Lessing has constructed this story with the assurance of an experienced artist...Hard, grim, honest and uncompromising as granite...Miss Lessing is a novelist of remarkable power.” Iyer further quotes Antonio White, “...The Grass Is Singing is an extremely mature psychological study. It is full of those terrifying touches of truth, seldom mentioned but instantly recognized by any standard, this book shows remarkable power and imagination. As a first novel by a woman barely thirty, it excites interest in her future.” (7)

Effects of Racism

Racism and its ill-effects were experienced by Lessing at an early age. Iyer studies her life and points at, “The seeds of racialism, colonialism, injustice, inequality and the feeling that to allocate rights and privileges on the basis of physical characteristic was really tantamount to sin, which was later to take fictional shape, was sown in her very childhood when her father migrated to Rhodesia with the family. ...The enforced isolation of the farm life and chronic conflict with her mother developed the urge for freedom and oppression. (33) Lessing after observing those inequities documented it in her works.

Unhappy Marriage, Desolate Life

Mary Turner and Dick Turner, farmers in Rhodesia suffered because of self imposed poverty. A conscientious farmer, Dick’s inability to succeed in his farming drives them apart. Mary, whose childhood is troubled, is unable to mingle with people in the ‘veld’. Her friends in the town, upon whom she depended morally, drove her into an unhappy marriage. The failed farmer, Dick Turner, is unable to provide Mary what she wanted most – emotional and financial support. Her parents’ unhappy marriage also left a trail of insecurity in Mary and that too played havoc in their marriage. Besides her unhappy marriage, the company of the natives became unbearable for her. After repeated attempts to mend her life, Mary became a prey to a native upon whom she depended mentally and physically. The story opens with a newspaper clipping telling about her murder.

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White Farmers in Rhodesia

The life a white farmer leads in Africa is quite different from that of others. The farms they hold span acres and so they lived in isolation and “met only very occasionally, hungry for contact with their own kind, to talk and discuss and pull to pieces, all speaking at once, making the most of an hour or so’s companionship before returning to their farms where they saw only their faces and the faces of their black servants for weeks on end.” (Grass, 10)

The old settlers teach the new arrivals how to carry themselves in that land. Lessing brings out their mindset as, “When old settlers say ‘One has to understand the country,’ what they mean is, ‘You have to get used to our ideas about the native.’ They are saying, in effect, ‘Learn our ideas, or otherwise get out: we don’t want you.’ (Grass, 18) But the new comers are “... young men brought up with vague ideas about equality” and were prepared “to treat them as human beings” but after few months they would change. Lessing portrays the change as, “...sensitive, decent young men had coarsened to suit the hard, arid, sundrenched country they had come to; they had grown a new manner to match their thickened sunburnt limbs and toughened bodies.” (Grass, 18)

Mary and Moses: White Woman and Black Man

Mary’s closeness to Moses, a native, is never forgiven. Though others were not aware of Mary’s mental breakdown they accused her for relying on Moses. Her obsession with Moses can be traced to her yearning for a strong shoulder to rely upon. Her dependence on others can be traced from the beginning. Initially, a child born out of mismatch between a drunkard and a house wife, she inherited the quarrelsome nature of the mother. Mary often acknowledges that she has the qualities like her mother. She initially averts marriage to avoid landing like her mother. Her mother in order to get sympathy of other men “enjoyed complaining in a hard sorrowful voice about her husband.” (33)

The lack of compassion between the father and mother left her a disturbed child. She dreaded at the thought of home. “When Mary thought of ‘home’ she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains; when she thought of marriage she remembered her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled; when she thought of children she saw her mother’s face at her children’s funeral – anguished, but as dry and as hard as rock.” (39) After getting herself a job she led a happy life like, “...the daughters of the wealthiest in South Africa, could do as she pleased –

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could marry, if she wished, anyone she wanted.” (35) After listening to her friends’ gossip, she traps herself in an unhappy marriage.

Her friends’ gossip dismantles her and emptiness pervades in. At night she started to questioned herself as, “Is this all? When I get to be old will this be all I have to look back on? (39) The void grew in her and she started to feel, “...restlessness, a vague dissatisfaction that took the pleasure out of her activities for a while.” (39) but the thought is gone in the daytime. The hollowness can be reasoned as, “She did not know what she wanted.” (39)

Wounded Psyche – Worrying about Nothingness

Mary’s wounded psyche makes a hasty decision to marry Dick Turner, a farmer who “disliked town”. She on the hand is a complete town girl. She admits that, “She loved the town, felt safe there and associated the country with her childhood.” (44) Her hatred for country life can be reasoned to two aspects – she associates her childhood to country life and the other is, “they were all surrounded by miles and miles of nothingness – miles and miles of veld.” (45) It is this nothingness she is afraid of. Dick married her for, “it is essential for him to love somebody.” Also he, “was lonely, he wanted a wife, and above all, children.” (47) Mary too felt “Nothing” about Dick. This lack of feeling pervaded throughout the marriage where both were unable to give anything for the other. After the marriage Mary “felt alien to him, unable to fit herself to his need.” (53)

Relationship with White Families

The helping hand lent by Slatter’s wife, the neighbouring farmer, is not acceptable to Mary. Her hatred for country and its people is more evident by her refusal to mingle with the farmers in the area. “Towards the end of that week a note came from Mrs.Slatter, asking them both for an evening party. Dick was really reluctant to go, because he had got out of the way of organized jollification; he was ill at ease in crowds. But he wanted to accept for Mary’s sake. She, however, refused to go. She wrote a formal note of thanks, saying she regretted, etc.” (80) It further isolated the Turners. Her inability to mingle with them is misunderstood as aloofness and Charlie tells his wife, “She’ll come off her high horse. Got ideas into her head, that’s what’s wrong with her. She’ll come to her senses. Not that she’s much loss. The pair of them need some sense shaken into them.”(81)

Seeking Anonymity in City

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Unable to stand the country life she runs away from the veld only to be rejected and rebuked by town people. Humiliated she “got home, and found herself back in her routine, with now not even day-dreams to sustain her, facing her future with a tired stoicism, she found she was exhausted”(102) It marks the beginning of her disintegration. “It seemed as if the trip into town had drained her reserves of strength and left her with just enough each day to do what had to be done, but nothing more. This was the beginning of an inner disintegration in her. It began with this numbness, as if she could no longer feel or fight.”(102)

Mary tried to run the veld when Dick fell ill. It rescued her from disintegration for some time and the field work gave a vent to her hatred. “The sensation of being boss over perhaps eighty black workers gave her new confidence; it was a good feeling, keeping them under her will, making them do as she wanted.”(112) Her authority was not accepted by the natives. Their protest made her tougher. She deducted half a crown for those who disobeyed her. When they protested, “she said shortly and finally that she had said she would deduct that amount and she intended to keep her word.”(113). After a vain protest they left the place. She felt victorious and “was filled with vindictiveness” (115)

Growing Void

The void in her grew after learning Dick’s way of farming. Earlier, he complained about bad luck but after she took it over she learnt about his incompetence. “Everywhere she found things begun and left unfinished. Here it was a piece of land that had been half-stumped and then abandoned so that the young trees were growing up over it again; there it was a cowshed made half of brick and iron and half of bush timber and mud. The farm was a mosaic of different crops. A single fifty-acre land had held sunflowers, sunhemp, maize, monkeynuts and beans. Always he reaped twenty sacks of this and thirty sacks of that with a few pounds profit to show on each crop. There was not a single thing properly done on the whole place, nothing! Why was he incapable of seeing it? Surely he must see that he would never get any further like this? (117). It is then she decides to talk to him so as to enable him “to face clearly where he would end if he did not change his methods.” (117) But when he took the reins he never discussed it with her. And “she felt aggrieved and insulted...and the old fatigue came over her.”(121)

After a few more futile conversations she fell into “Emptiness”. (132) The emptiness reflected in her appearance and she started to speak in fragmented sentences. Often she forgot to do what she was doing and it is then Moses started to persuade her. Initially, his attitude irritated her but later started, “a new relation between them.”(154) Moses started to tower her and “it was impossible for her to thrust him out of her mind like something unclean, as she had done with all the others in the past. She was being forced into contact, and she never ceased to be aware of him.” (156) In her dreams “he had stood over her, powerful and commanding” (156)

Charlie Slatter visited them when Dick fell sick and realized the relationship between Mary and Moses is beyond master and servant. He is horrified to learn that she has gone native by wearing the cloth sold for natives in the store. Considering himself as a savior of Dick and other white farmers in the country, Charlie makes preparations for the departure of Dick and Mary to a sea shore. Also he hires a manager, Tony, to look after the farm. Mary viewed Tony as her rescuer initially, but later she realized that none could rescue her and the veld will definitely overpower her.

Unable to Mend Life

On the verge of total collapse she confides to Tony, “It’s long time since I came here,’ she said, looking straight at him, in appeal. ‘So long I can’t quite remember...I should have left long ago. I don’t know why I didn’t. I don’t know why I came. But things are different. Very different.’ She stopped. Her face was pitiful; her eyes were painful holes in her face. ‘I don’t know anything. I don’t understand. Why is all this happening? I didn’t mean it to happen. But he won’t go away, he won’t go away.’ (187)

The problem with Mary is that she is upset with her life and unable to mend it fall a prey to life. Her inability to face life alone dismissed her. The realization that one must lead one’s own life dawns in her much later. She acknowledges it finally, “She would walk out her road alone, she thought. That was the lesson she had to learn. If she had learned it, long ago, she would not be standing here now, having been betrayed for the second time by her weak reliance on a human being who should not be expected to take the responsibility for her.” (201) She also realizes that the illness crept inside her long before, “I am ill, she said confidently,...I’ve always been ill, ever since I can remember. I am ill *here*. She pointed to her chest, sitting bolt upright in

bed.” (203) Her complete destruction is inevitable for she knows “she was in a trap, cornered and helpless”.(203)

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