

# Demystifying Woman in Novel of Doris Lessing

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**Abstract:** *The Grass is Singing* is the first novel, published in 1950, by British Nobel prize winning author Doris Lessing. It takes place in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in south Africa, during the late 1940s and deals with the racial politics between whites and blacks in that country which was then a British colony. The novel created a sensation when it was first published and became an instant success in Europe and United States.

The novel is set in South Africa, which at the time the action unfolds was populated and governed according to the rules of apartheid, institutionalized racism in which the white minority was socially, legally and politically dominant over the black majority.

The book is perhaps the most interesting when the author describes the ideology of white colonist in Africa. In particular, the idea that extreme racism develops out of a need to justify economic exploitation is poignantly posed. It is not that whites oppress blacks because they hate them, rather they hate them because they have to oppress them and deny their human worth to maintain their standard of living. Thus, newcomers from Britain must be taught how to deal with and feel about the natives and poor whites are despised because they seem to blur the colour lines.

**Keywords:** institutionalized, ideology, poignantly, natives.

## 1. Introduction

Mary Turner is an intelligent, efficient, modern-minded woman. Earliest of all Doris Lessing's women, Mary is bound by some of her own prejudices and conventionalities that pose fatal problems to her. She submits fatalistically to the forces of her society and falls prey to the racial prejudices imbibed in her by her society. Also, she is unable to understand her inner schism until at the end of her life.

Mary suffers from inner fragmentation because she is unable to integrate the 'unconscious' or darker aspect of her Self into her awareness. Caught up in the dry life of an African farm, as a wife of an unsuccessful farmer whom she does not love, Mary is shown as a tragic figure. She gets murdered by her black servant, the causes of which lie in her racial prejudices and her lack of inner awareness.

However, nearly at the end of her life, just before she gets murdered by her black servant, Mary attains a knowledge of her Self and the causes of its fragmentation, which makes her a 'New Woman' in the real sense of the term. *The Grass is Singing* begins with a factual account of Mary's death, and gradually, in an extended flashback, unfolds the tragic life of this 'New 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. It is the

society which is responsible for Mary's racial prejudices as well as her deeper psychological problems.

Tony Marston, a young English man who has been only a few weeks on the farm as assistant to Dick Turner, Mary's husband, reacts thus to Mary's murder by her black servant: "He wondered how all this had begun, where the tragedy had started. For he clung obstinately to the belief... that causes of the murder must be looked for a long way back, and that it was they which were important. 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?"

Being a member of the conservative English society in South Africa, Mary is influenced by the racial prejudices of her society. As a result of her childhood of misery and poverty, she has also been turned into an emotionally frigid woman. She is the daughter of a boozing workman in the railways and a mother made bitter by the prevailing poverty. By the time Mary achieves financial independence, at the age of twenty, as a typist in a small town, she has already become an emotional cripple, repelled by intimacy, preferring the 'impersonality' of a solitary existence. Little happens between the age of twenty and thirty, besides the deaths of both parents which hardly move her - an intimation of her (insipient) psychic stagnation. Tracing Mary's sexual aversion back to her childhood and the unhappy relationship between her parents, the narrator observes: "But then there are so many people who don't want them [the joys of life]: so many for whom the best things have been poisoned from the start." With this comment, the sick elements in Mary's character are linked with the poisons in her early life. Here, as elsewhere, Doris Lessing implies the failure of family as a social institution. Mary's psychological disturbance with its tragic consequences has its roots in a long family history.

After escaping from the tyrannies of her family and home, Mary leads a happy life as a typist in town. She apparently leads the 'free' life of a new woman - free as any man; intelligent and efficient enough to stand on her own, without needing any man's support. She works in an office, stays in a girl's club meant for unmarried girls; hence she is free - socially and financially. She is a person of importance, admired at office for her efficiency and at the club she advises other girls out of their problems. She is regarded almost as a maiden aunt to whom one can tell one's miseries. There men take her out every day and treat her like a sister. While all her friends get married, Mary does not feel like entering any emotional relationship with men. The author writes of her as, "a woman of thirty without love-

troubles, headaches, back-aches, sleeplessness or neurosis. She did not know how rare she was." Though Mary sometimes feels panicky about her kind of life, she never thinks of marrying. This is because of her unhappy childhood memories, with which she always associated marriage and family. Thinking of 'home' Mary remembers a wooden box shaken by passing trains - that was her parent's house. When she thinks of marriage, she remembers her father coming here red-eyed and fuddled. So, she could never think of marriage without resentment. She hates her father and loves, pities and identifies herself with her mother. After their marriage, when Dick tells her about his mother and how his mother had had a hard time, "... the remark made her feel kin to him, for he loved his mother and resented his father." She always associates herself with her mother. Later, when she thinks of having a child so that it would be a good company, she always thinks of herself as her own mother was, and the child, her daughter accompanying her.

By hating her father, she seems to be avenging her mother's sufferings. The author writes that it had never occurred to her that her father also might have suffered. "About what?" She would have retorted to the idea. "He's a man, isn't he? He can do as he likes. Doris Lessing writes of this attitude in Mary as the 'arid feminism'. which she has inherited from her mother. She has a small core of contempt for men. She says to the other girls at club, 'men! they get all the fun! Her mother, we are told, was always indifferent to her husband.

Even her scornful ridicule of him, she used only when her friends came to tea. "It was as if she did not wish to give her husband the satisfaction of knowing that she cared anything at all, or felt anything for him, even contempt and derision". Later Mary's attitude towards her husband is similar. She remains indifferent and emotionally untouched even after her marriage. The narrator depicts this nature of Lessing's New Woman as having "an extraordinary ability to withdraw from the 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." Mary feels relieved to find that she felt nothing for Dick. "She was able maternally to bestow the gift of herself on this humble stranger and remain untouched". She does not cherish any feeling of love for Dick. When she runs back to her former city life, she straightway goes to the girl's club without even remembering that she is a married woman. She 'knows' it only when the matron there tells her that they will not take married women. Marriage and husband meant nothing to her.

Mary has a profound distaste for sex. Before her marriage, when she hears her friends commenting on her state of being unmarried, she gets deeply hurt. The first man she then allows to approach her is a widower of fifty-five with half-grown children. It is because she feels safer with him, as she does not associate ardours and embraces with a middle-aged man whose attitude towards her, she thinks, would be almost fatherly: "Nothing really, could have been more suitable : since

apparently she had to get married, this was the kind of marriage to suit her best.". But when he shows his passion, Mary runs away, overcome by violent revulsion. Though Mary likes other people's children, she shudders at the thought of having any of her own. She loathes the sight of native women with their children hung to their backs, 'like monkeys' - Mary thinks. She hates the way those women suckled their babies. 'There was something in their calm satisfied maternity that made her blood boil'. "Their babies hanging on to them like leeches" - she used to say to herself, shuddering, because she thinks with horror, of suckling a child. The idea itself makes her feel quite sick. Later, even when she thinks of having a daughter as a companion, Doris Lessing writes "that Mary does not think of that daughter as a small baby: "that was a stage she would have to get through as quickly as possible. "Thus, Mary Turner is free from the traditional feelings for things like marriage; family, sex and children. That way she is quite free - emotionally. She is also efficient, dominating and strong-willed. She expects her husband to be appealing and timid. Her predominant feeling for her husband is one of pity, one of a protective mother. Lessing writes of how, on the first night of their marriage, Mary falls asleep "holding his hand protectively, as she might have held a child's whom she had wounded.", and Dick 'approached her with the timid adoration which was the only touch she could have borne'.

But this efficient woman does not emerge as a successful woman, the reasons for which are many. First of all, Mary is not completely free; she is bound by the rules and conventions of her society. She resents marriage and remains single until 'society made her get married'. She starts worrying when once she overhears her friends commenting on her style of life. One of her friend's comments on her dress and another on her being unmarried though over thirty. Another friend remarks: she will not marry.

She just isn't like that, isn't like that at all'. Hearing, these comments Mary is stunned. From that day onwards Mary who earlier resented marriage, starts unconsciously searching for a husband. She takes the ribbon off her hair though with regret, brings different types of clothes and discards her former childish skirts. Thus, Doris Lessing shows how Mary, who apparently never involved herself with others, changes her life-style merely to satisfy the society. After that incident, for the first time in her life she feels uncomfortable with men. The author writes, " a small core of contempt for them, that had protected her from sex as surely as if she had been hideous, had melted, and she lost her poise.". All this, because society wants all its women to fit themselves compulsorily into the role of a married woman. And Mary is not bold enough to face her society. As the author notes, "... all women become conscious, sooner or later, of that impalpable but steel- strong pressure to get married, and Mary . . . was brought face to face with it suddenly and most unpleasantly.' She marries Dick Turner, a poor, solitary farmer, merely because she cares for society and its judgement. As their marriage has no strong base of mutual

love, it turns out to be a failure. Dick, in Mary's mind, is associated with destiny. When he intends to start a kaffir store on his farm and asks Mary to run it, it seems a terrible thing to her because the store reminds her of the ugly menacing store of her childhood, and hence, an omen. But these things she could not explain to Dick, for the good reason that he was associated in her mind with the greyness and misery of her childhood, and it would have been like arguing with destiny itself.

So, with that weak foundation of marriage where her husband was associated with the 'grey misery and with that terrible store she had to manage, Mary thinks of going back to her former city-life. She thinks nothing can prevent her from going. But here again, she is afraid of the society. She cannot think of going to town and facing her friends with her failed marriage. She remembers her friend's comment, 'she is not like that. Hence Mary is not 'new' and bold enough to face society and act according to her own will. The institution of marriage acts as an obstacle in a woman's journey toward freedom and happiness. Mary once runs away from the arid atmosphere of her married life craving for her former happy life in town, only to find that she does not fit in her former role, as now she is a married woman. The girls' club cannot take her, and she also does not get the job she had served before. So, she can do nothing but return to her husband's house.

Mary is not independent-minded 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 another and remains without any. When her husband falls ill, she takes over the running of the farm and management of the natives. She lashes a native across his face and this incident is vividly pictured. "A thick weal pushed up along the dark skin of the cheek as she looked, and off his chin, and splashed to his chest. ". And Mary had done it involuntarily. She looks at the whip as if it had swung on its own accord without her willing it. This unintended act is nothing but the 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 'recognises' him by his scar, in defiance of the white law which dictates that one black looks like another to a white woman. This black man assumes greater and 'greater importance in Mary's life. She depends on him completely - even to button her dress up she needs his help until he comes to be both her life and death., Doris Lessing shows, through Mary, that tragic fate is indispensable for a social misfit and failure. Before the novel opens, a quotation from an unknown author reads: 'It is by the failures and misfits of a civilization that one can best judge its weaknesses. Mary is essentially the failure and misfit of her society and culture. Unlike other women she had no desire to Marry - so she is a social misfit, misfit to the role of a married woman. This is linked with her failure in her marriage with Dick. Again, her behaviour with Moses the black servant, is shown to be the cause of her being murdered by him. In the beginning she

behaves with the natives in accordance with that strong unwritten white law. But when she lashes across the face of Moses, it creates a deep scar on his face, and she starts "recognising" him. Again, it is assumed that a white man should never be afraid of a black man and should never show his weaknesses in front of the black. Mary is afraid of Moses because she unconsciously feels that he may react, strike back and avenge his oppression. She was unable to treat this boy as she had treated all the 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. In Kenneth Burke's terms, Mary's "assertion" threatens to beget its "counter assertion". She knows it and hence her fear. And, Moses knows that she is afraid of him. When Moses tells Mary that he wants to leave working in her house, she shows her weakness by sobbing and crying helplessly. Further, Mary's repressed sexual feelings get awakened by Moses. Mary had a 'dark attraction' for Moses though she would 'die rather than acknowledge it.' So, in all these ways Mary breaks those steel — strong laws of white culture. She talks to Moses in the same way as she talks with a white man.

Dick and Mary lead a secluded life. They are disliked by their farming neighbours because they are so reclusive. The frontier traditions of hospitality are ignored, and Mary does not respond to the friendly overtures from Charlie Slater's wife, her nearest white neighbour. They do not even have a telephone and they refuse to join in the local social activities. Mary even rejects opportunities for 'women's' talk with other farmer's wives. "They did not recognise the need for esprit de corps: that, really was why they were so hated." Moreover, they live in extremely primitive conditions and this irritates the white community. "Why, some natives (though not many thank heavens) had houses as good; and it would give them a bad impression to see white people living in such a way". They also refuse any financial help from Charlie. Thus, the Turners, through failure at farming and through poverty seem somehow to have let down the side of their white society. Their way of life itself defies the white rule which says that no white man should be as poor as the black servants. Because, if the natives perceive that they are, in whatever sense, as good as the whites, this perception may unleash all kinds of unthinkable aspirations.

Through Mary and Dick, the failures and misfits of white civilization, one can recognize the weaknesses of that civilization. Mary, in turn, is a victim of the weaknesses of her civilization and society. It is the social institution of family where! is her drunkard father ill-treated her mother— which results in Mary's sexual aversions. And then it is social pressures to marry that place her in such a position that her sexual oddity must be her downfall.

"While Mary's sexual aversion to men in general causes her sexual unresponsiveness with her husband, that failure in marriage in turn intensifies her sexual fears." Similarly, her unquestioning participation in the racist system of her culture causes her abuse of her farmworkers, and she becomes an

embodiment of the cruellest aspects of that system. Mary's cruelty to her servants, and to Moses especially is nothing but her acceptance of and participation in the system of domination of her society. Society is not all to blame. Mary, the efficient, independent and sensitive 'new woman' cherishes certain, conventionality and is still in a state of ignorance that allows her complicity in the system of racial injustice. Also, she lacks that strength of character to face social pressures to marry. .", she "needed a man stronger than herself" and tries to force Dick to "take the ascendancy over her". She dislikes Dick's dysfunctional love of the land, respect for his trees and his crops. When he has to leave his land for a few months, he waxes sentimental and expresses it by mournfully taking the sand in his hands. He refuses to grow tobacco because it is an inhuman crop, that will spoil the fertility of his land. Such a sentimentality is traditionally considered a feminine quality - and Mary hates it in Dick. Whenever she notices Dick foolishly spending on unnecessary things neglecting the essentials, Mary simply refuses I to think about it. In her eyes, Dick has first exploit d her by bringing her to the harsh life of the farm and then failed her by stubbornly sticking to his unprofiled table farming practices.

At this time, when any influence would have directed her into a new path, when her whole being was poised, that she unconsciously develops a 'dark attraction' for Mose which can be seen as a result of this need in her, for a strong and dominating kind of man. Moses is presented through his physical strength and abundance. He is 'great looking' man' with 'big hands' and 'broad back'. 'He was very tall and looked more so in that small house'. In his manners too he is of a dominating kind. "Mary feels helplessly in his power", and he 'asserts a masculine authority over her'. She is subdued by his 'conscious power' 'the superior sexual potency of the native' He develops an 'easy, confident, bullying insolence.'

Thus, Mary's unsatisfied longings are awakened by the issue of dominance. What strikes her is his muscularity, his bulk and his stature the masculine power that could allow him to dominate her physically. She first loses her compose when she observes Moses washing himself in the backyard. The memory of the scene, of 'that thick black neck with t e lather frothing whitely on it, the powerful back stooping over the bucket, was a goad to her. The resulting emotion was one of anger, and she felt the same impulse that had once made her bring down the lash across his face.

From this point bn, 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 the sexual 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 long-hidden desire to be dominated and to disprove the judgment that she is a -sexual, that "she is not like that". Thus, Mary's character contains within it, the causes of her tragic downfall. And the causes can be traced back to the weaknesses of her society and culture. On the face of it, the novel looks more like dealing with the racial problem than with the problems of women. It may also seem that the character of Moses which comes into prominence as a force that swallows Mary, is more important than that of Mary. But woman's problem is associated with the racial issue; there is an affinity between these two oppressed groups. Rosalind Miles in her *Female Form* (1987), A writes that the native is brought into prominence first through Mary's inability to deal with "those whose situation 4 is ironically analogous with hers". In this critical work she suggests that there is an affinity between them which is partly suggested through language difficulty. Mary's reluctance to learn 'kitchen kaffir' symbolizes her awkwardness of communication with all people. This critic calls Mary's cruel attitude on the farm as that of 'the oppressor in the heart of the oppressed". As for the central character in the novel, each scenery and character in the novel serves to emphasize the problems of Mary who stands for all modern, sensitive white women in South Africa. Th desert, for instance, which is so beautifully and realistically pictured, is mainly to emphasize Mary's miseries. Initially, the desert with its terrible heat, is a real physical landscape on which Mary has to live and suffer. But subtly and gradually, as Mary's hopes fail like her husband's spring time crop, the desert becomes symbolic. About the desert, Rosalind Miles (*Ibid.*, p.107), writes that the desert's aridity becomes internalised, its vast wastes become external reproach symbolizing Mary's inner devastation. As for the main characters, they are sketched in relation to Mary's character. Dick's character, though it is sympathetically drawn, stands in Mary's life as a symbol of destiny, of the 'grey misery' of her life.

The character of Moses is brought out not as a human being, but as a part of the nightmare in which Mary is swallowed up. He is rather a force imposing on her weak mind, than a person. He represents Mary's 'shadow' - the repressed, and alien side of her personality 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 very important indicators of her unconscious mind. Mary dreams about Moses, frightening dreams where she is forced to touch him. She also dreams that Dick is dead, and she feels tremendous relief. This, however, turns to fear as Moses and her father approach, merged together in an image of menacing sexual dominance. As Ruth Whittaker rightly observes, "Moses represents the 'black' hidden side of Mary's nature, and she is terrified of his attraction for her, because this

may force her to come into contact, not just with him, but with the dark forces of her own personality. Yet she does achieve this contact, and in the midst of her disintegration she realises that she has disproved the charge that she is sexually arid." When Tony Marston talks to her during this state of mental disintegration, Mary seems cut off from any concern: "She said suddenly, they said I was not like that, not like that, not like that". It was like a gramophone that had got stuck at one point. Mary's triumph is at the emergence of her sexuality and it is important to her even though it is linked with break down and madness.

Doris Lessing sees breakdown and madness as states of great potential. By experiencing madness Mary understands the fragmented state of her own consciousness and faces the most feared and hated aspect of her self - the 'evil' in her, i.e., her repressed sexuality expressed in her 'dark' attraction' for Moses. By achieving this knowledge Mary enjoys a healing reconciliation and sense of liberation. But it is only at the end of her life that Mary is able to achieve this knowledge and thereby to recognise her identity in its fullness, to gradually shed her former attitudes and customs. 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 responsibility to others.

Upon this realization, "She rose to her feet with a queerly appropriate dignity ... She would walk out her road alone, she thought. That was the lesson she had to learn." This acceptance of responsibility seems to open her consciousness to a saving revelation and expansion of feeling. "Propelled by fear, but also by knowledge, she rose out of bed". Walking through the dark out onto the verandah, she sees Moses, "And at the sight of him ... she felt she had only to move forward, to explain, to appeal, and the terror would be dissolved". (GS., p.216). At this moment of moral awakening, her instinct is toward connection and reconciliation - "to move forward, to explain, to appeal". It is as if for one half moment, the very second before her murder, Mary has effected a change; her death is clearly infused with dignity by virtue of her hard-won awakening and expansion of consciousness. She has her redeeming moment of comprehending the conditions of her death - both her contribution to it and the native's understanding of it. She transcends the state of ignorance that had made her 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 Mary a 'new woman' in the real sense of the term.

## 2. Conclusion

The study points out the problems a woman like Mary Turner has to face, in emerging as a 'New Woman' in the real sense of the term. The study has attempted an analysis of Mary's life and the causes of her tragic end. Mary's sufferings are caused by her racial prejudices as well as her inner fragmentation. Mary's society - the White Colonial society - has imbibed in her certain racial prejudices, and Mary has unquestioningly accepted them - which leads to her abuse of the black servants. Mary's hatred for the black is thus one of the causes of her being murdered by one of them - Moses. Mary Turner, as the analysis shows, is thus, in the initial stage of her development as New Woman. Because, unlike the later women of Doris Lessing, Mary is unable to associate her own oppressed state with that of the black - the other oppressed class of her White, male-dominated Colonial society. However, nearly at the end of her life, Mary understands and accepts Moses when she achieves an awareness of her Self.

All her life, Mary is shown to be unaware of her inner schism - the split between her conscious/acknowledged self and the unconscious/unacknowledged self. So, she suffers inner fragmentation. She achieves an integration of both the aspects of his self only at the end of her life, thus achieving 'individuation' or integrity and wholeness of self.

Mary Turner emerges as a New Woman at the last moment of her life. Because, in Lessing's sense of the term 'New Woman', the woman has to be free of her inner fragmentation i.e., she has to achieve inner freedom besides social, political or any other freedom.

## References

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