

**COLONIAL AND RACIAL MYTHS IN DORIS LESSING'S
*THE GRASS IS SINGING***

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's literary work is remarkably large and it includes novels, short stories, science fiction, memoir, non-fictional prose and poetry. She has written more than thirty five books ranging from social realism to science fiction. She holds a place of remarkable distinction in the history of post-war British literature. Her novel, *The Grass is Singing* is regarded as a landmark in the twentieth century literature in English. A masterpiece of social realism, the novel is set in colonized Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and concerned with the issue of colour bar and its disastrous effect on the marginal whites and the native Africans.

This paper seeks to explore various colonial and racial myths in the novel. The most powerful and necessary myth was that of the unbridgeable gap between the black and white races, and directly associated to the superiority and the unbridgeable gap between the white and the black, was a myth of egalitarianism of the white settlers. The paper also seeks to explore how peasants and black people were treated by their masters during that period. It sketches the moving story of a complex relationship between a white farmer's wife and her black houseboy, which ventures into the realm of the colonial taboo, and its disastrous consequences.

Key words: Colonial, racial, myth, peasants, white and black people

From 1923 to 1980, Rhodesia remained a white colony. The concept of colonialism is significant in Lessing's literary works and she questions the entire values of Rhodesian white colonial society in it. It applies not only to the African setting of some of her novels, but also to the very model of her novelistic perception. Lorna Sage says, "The Colony - the British part at least - is populated by refugees from history, who, having mislaid 'their' England, are fatally adrift, even while they appropriate the land and become more and more determined on a 'white' Rhodesia" (1983, p.21). To be a colonial means that one is living in a strange land and this applies even when the colonial family has lived for generations. Though it is a 'home,' but it is alien, a place of deep cultural differences. In order to maintain what they feel to be their separateness and their identity, they can carry their own cultural distinctness imposing it where it can be imposed, distancing themselves from areas where it cannot be.

Doris Lessing has devoted much of her skill to the explanation of the racial position in South Africa. The seed of racialism, colonialism, injustice, inequality and the feeling that to allocate rights and privileges on the basis of physical characteristic was sown in her very childhood when her father migrated to Rhodesia with the family. Her relationship with her father was close, she argued with him the politics of the racial situation at the age of eight, and she absorbed his idealism, his skill for fantasy and his sense of justice. Lessing speaks directly of that life and her own early training into racist values, her views of the third world struggle for liberation and of the class-bound life of her own English neighbourhood. Her childhood observation led not only to an enraged compassion for the black Rhodesians, but also for an incisive analysis of white colonialist mentality. She developed a sixth sense for recognizing hypocrisy in the 'civilized' British at an early age.

The novel, *The Grass is Singing* is a fine re-creation of Africa's majestic beauty, a fine psychological portrait of lives in confusion and most of all, a passionate probe into ideology of white domination. The notion of supremacy and the discriminatory attitude displayed by white characters is one of the main themes in the novel. We can get an idea as to how prejudice and racism are present in the Rhodesian racist society. The novel starts with a cutting from newspaper article about the death of the protagonist Mary Turner. It is a strong psychological study of a frustrated woman and her marital relationship. But at the same time, Lessing paints a picture of Rhodesian society. It sketches how peasants and black people were treated by their masters during that period.

This novel is set in Africa and in the first chapter we learn that a white woman, Mary Turner, has been murdered by her black servant. In an extended flashback, it is recounted her courtship and marriage. She had escaped from a childhood of misery and poverty to work happily in the town. In her thirties she marries a lonely farmer, Dick, who takes her to live on a remote farm in the veldt. Financial crisis led them to emigrate from their homeland, and though they are the masters in Rhodesia, they find themselves utterly misfits in the alien country. They try to safeguard their dubious command over the natives by sticking to their ingrained racial prejudice.

The first issue that comes to receive our attention as we embark on a close analysis of the different nuances of colour-bar in colonized Rhodesia is the strange situation of the settler-whites or the poor whites. In colonial experience myths replace history which contains inconvenient facts. A common myth was the superiority to the black population. This was cultivated in order to justify the white takeover of Africa. Thus the most powerful myths were those which emphasized the white rescues of the country from savagery and the civilizing influence of European as culture. Perhaps the most necessary myth was that of the unbridgeable gap between the black and white races. Directly associated to the superiority and the unbridgeable gap between the white and the black, was a further myth of egalitarianism of the white settlers. Having in common the colour of their skins, they strive to show a united front to the black population, a situation explored by Lessing in her novel where the white unity is depicted straining to a breaking point.

The colonial myth questioned in novel is that of white superiority and separateness from the native people. The most shocking aspect of the novel becomes not so much the murder but the neighbour's attitude to it. The Turners, through failure at farming, through poverty and then through Mary's getting herself murdered, seem somehow to let them down. It had severely threatened white solidarity, a quality carefully cherished in the colonial society. The Turners live in extremely primitive conditions, and this is a source of irritation to the scattered white

community. “Why, some natives (though not many thank heaven) had houses as good, and it would give them a bad impression to see white people living in such a way” (30).

In this novel, Lessing exposes the negative aspects of colonization through the discriminatory treatment to the native people and Eurocentric ideology. Dick and Mary are barely surviving. They are not well respected by other whites, they have little money, and they do little to try to and fit in with white society. Despite this, they still consider themselves better than the natives and servants. Mary considers them less than humans. Mary’s extreme hatred for the black Africans can be defined as psychological as she has been infused with racist notions from her early childhood. The inferiority of the black characters and the notion of the white supremacy have been instilled in her psyche by the other white racist members of the society.

Lessing in the character of Tony Marston illustrates a man in the process of becoming adjusted to the ways of white Rhodesia. He is hired by Charlie Slatter to take over the Turner’s farm; he is still new enough to the country to question the rules with which he is implicitly expected to comply. Lessing uses him to express an alternative view to the colonial myth. He is not a liberal; he is committed to an ideology different from that of the white colonialist he is still uncommitted to the assumption and more of settler life. Tony is aware that the motive for the murder is complicated by Mary’s emotional involvement with the black servant Moses. To the whites, Mary’s murder has to be seen as unprovoked. Since any guilt on her part would muddle the equation of black with guilt and white with innocence. Charlie Slatter witnessed Mary’s relationship with Moses, and is terrified at the acceptance of the servant’s power.

Tony has to learn to hide his knowledge, to adopt double standard of his chosen country. He soon realizes that the murder itself is relatively unimportant to the white community. Charlie Slatter and the police sergeant are not concerned about Mary’s death; their instinctive horror and fear is with the threat to their entire social structure. Tony understands that they are defending white civilization. “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 human relationship, whether, for good or for evil with a black person: For once it admits that, it crushes, and nothing can save it (30). The whites refuse to accept the blacks as humans. To this end, the various unwritten laws of colonial Africa serve as convenient support for them. The laws are invoked both for excessively cruel treatment of the blacks; and for the necessity of white maintaining a proper status in the colonies.

The white woman’s desire for a black was a theme as taboo for novelists in Rhodesia and Lessing questions the entire values of Rhodesian white colonial society in her novel. Everywhere in Lessing’s works, myths collide with real life and the main theme the clash of cultures where the colonial myths do not suffice to protect their perpetrators from African reality. The strength of Lessing’s fiction comes from her comprehension both of the prevailing myth and of the forces which challenged them. She grew up in Southern Rhodesia and she shared in the culture she describes. The picture she gives of the white dominated society is realistic and convincing.

Regarding black-white contact, the laws are so rigid that the black house boy Moses, cannot ride in the same car in which Mary Turner’ corpse is, “one could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she were dead, and murdered by him” (28-29). The black man becomes the ‘epitome of crime and violence. “The black policeman is not permitted to touch a white man even in pursuit of his duty.”(148) The control of the white characters and their power is demonstrated in the description of Charlie Slatter’s unpunished murder of a black character: “But Slatter believed in farming with a sjambok. It hung over his front door on the

wall: You shall not mind killing if it is necessary. He had once killed a native in a fit of temper. He was fined thirty pounds. Since then he kept his temper.” (15)

Mary as a native of Southern Rhodesia has none of the analytical perspective on the racial problem. Before she came to Dick Turner's farm, she had never had any direct contact with the natives, but had developed a code of behaviour towards them just as they had towards her. She is outraged at the too-casual behaviour of a native; she is intent on teaching the natives "the dignity of work which is a doctrine bred into the bones of every white South African." She hates their physical vitality, but most of all she hates the native women. A clear example of this is: "... Above all she hated the way they suckled their babies with their breasts hanging down for everyone to see... there was something in their calm, satisfied maternity that made her blood boils... She did not think of herself, but rather of these black women, as strange, they were alien and primitive creatures with ugly desires. She couldn't bear to think about..." (115-116).

Mary's conceited behavior widens the gap between the black and white. There is an occasion when Moses asks for water in his own tongue and is insulted by Mary instantly, "Don't talk that gibberish to me." (146) But when he repeats his request in English, she is infuriated and says, 'Don't speak English to me' (146). Moses feels that he has been forbidden to speak his own tongue and then hers. It is really conceited behavior that strengthens the gap between the black and white. This attitude of Mary about the native people is not merely her own whim but a collective product of the colonial society. When she hits Moses, she is worried that he could complain to the police. She is the least upset by the fear of persecution as she knows very well that she has all the administrative as well as judiciary powers in her favour. She was troubled by the fact that even the native people had to complain against the white, which was absolutely unacceptable to any white person.

Mary had ruthlessly whipped Moses across his face when he was working in the field. After many servants had left working for Mary, Dick brings Moses as the new house boy, suddenly she 'sees' him and a new relationship is established. Ironically, later in the novel, there is a shift in the power relations between Mary and Moses. Instead of Mary holding all the power, as in the beginning of the novel, she has now placed Moses in a powerful position as she has come to rely on him. This is evident when Moses leaves the house to return to his sleeping quarters and Mary commands him to stay with her. But in spite of the attitude to dignity she was striving to assume, she sobbed out again, "you must not go and her voice was an entreaty. He held the glass to her lips, so that she had to put up her hand to hold it, and with the tears running down her face she took a gulp. She looked at him pleadingly over the glass and with renewed fear; saw an indulgence in his eyes" (186). This quote emphasizes the fact that Mary is utterly dependent on Moses.

Mary's strong aversion to the veldts and her ingrained racial hatred against the native servants pursue her like a nightmare. The alienation between her and Dick grows, and Mary's increasing psychological dislocation drives her to neurosis and she suffers her lot till Moses' dagger descends upon her to read her life. But before Mary's tongue can articulate her appeal, Moses' strong arm descends upon her, and Mary's lifeless body falls on the ground. He casts a last look on Mary's corpse and lets his dagger drop beside her. He drowns himself in indifference and goes to sit on an ant-heap till his pursuers come the next day to drag him to the altar of 'white' judgment. And finally he succeeds in asserting his identity through the act of violence.

In short, the concept of colonialism and racialism is thus important in her fiction. Lessing's view regarding colonialism could be best expressed with reference to Frantz Fanon, who says, "

Europe has multiplied divisions and opposing groups, has fashioned classes and sometimes even racial prejudices, and has endeavored by every means to bring about and intensified the stratification of colonized society...These differences are born of colonial history, in other words of oppression.” (Fanon, 1967, p.10) Racialism, for Lessing, is characterized by the atrocious wrongs which the white people have inflicted upon the back in the extremely race and class conscious colonial society.

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