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A Humanistic Study of Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing

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Abstract: Humanism is a term which mainly gives importance to the feeling of love and compassion among individuals. Doris Lessing as a writer prefers shedding light upon the cruelty of the real world instead of creating something imaginary which cannot be felt by people around the world. One can perceive this fact through analyzing her first work *The Grass is Singing* (1950). The paper analyzes this work from four viewpoints: psychoanalytical, feministic, racial and autobiographical. Doris Lessing is a British writer who was born in 1919 in Kermanshah, Iran. She published her first novel *The Grass is Singing* in England in 1950.

Racism has been one of the most widespread problems around the world since the beginning of creation. Therefore Racial discrimination is a very crucial problem which appeared since the presence of different races at the same place. The essence of this problem lies in the belief that there are superior races, usually the whites, which should be obeyed and served by the other races which are considered inferior. In fact, it is very difficult to trace the history of racism around the world. There are some writers who were interested in racism: Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, Ralph Ellison, Jean Rhys and Toni Morrison. *The Grass is Singing* will analyze some of the racist attitudes toward Rhodesian people adopted by their masters, the men and women, because they are considered inferior to their white masters.

Literature is the language of the land; of the people and their emotions. In this sense, African literature also reflects the experiences, emotions, hopes and aspirations of the Blacks. Women are often exposed to experience various kinds of exploitation. Black women, in particular, are doubly-jeopardized. Some women are very much vulnerable that they can be attacked easily, and they do not fight back. Being psychologically emotional and tender, they lose to possess the inner strength and become submissive.

Doris Lessing is a writer who is interested in the psychological probing of her characters which is obvious through her creation of Mary's character. She believes that any character should have a psychological dimension since our psychic life is the stimulus that moves us to do and react in a certain way. In *The Grass is Singing*, she succeeds in depicting Mary's psychological life and relating her feelings and reactions minutely. As already pointed out, this reading of Mary's psychological life is justified as the book highlights her psychic conflicts, repressed desires and wish-fulfillment. Psychological postulates are helpful and illuminating in recognizing this important side of the novel's strained character, Mary.

Mary Turner's psychic life is very rich in psychological problems which have accompanied her until her death. At the beginning of the novel, Mary did not have any psychological problems since she was living happily. The narrators say, "Till she was twenty-five nothing happened to break the smooth and comfortable life she led" (GS 33). The narrator also says: "She was very happy: that was perhaps her only positive quality, for there was nothing else distinctive about her, though at twenty-five she was at her prettiest" (GS 33). But this peace of mind is over when she hears her friends talk about her. She experiences her first shock when she knows the truth about herself from people she considers close to her. The narrator states that: She was alone; and heard people talking in low voices, and caught her

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own name. She rose to go inside and declare herself: it was typical of her that her first thought was, how unpleasant it would be for her friends to know she had overheard.

It is in connection with the colonial discourse that the situations of Dick and Mary Turner are interesting to analyze. Whereas the black character of Moses breaks the written rules and laws imposed on him, Dick and Mary cannot play the part that they, according to the society, are supposed to play and as a result they break the unwritten rules and challenge the colonial discourse.

Her friends and people around her who have the major effect upon her psychic life represent the superego. When she hears them talking about her clothes and age, she realizes that the image she sees herself in differs from that of reality. According to her friends, she is a woman who is coming close to her thirties; therefore, she should change her way of dressing and her hairstyle to that of an adult woman.

Through her few years of marriage, Mary passes through many changes which have great effect upon her psychic life. These psychological problems stem from the fact that she is not ready to change or modify her life. For instance, before marriage she used to read a lot, lately she appears reluctant even to hold a book. Other evidence of her change is how she turns from an extrovert person to an introvert, self-centered who is not willing to communicate with anyone, even her husband.

She isolates herself from others, she cannot express her feelings to anyone; therefore, she represses these feelings which will subvert her psychic life. Furthermore, her unsuccessful marriage and isolation from society make her very pessimistic about her life. She loses hope in the future and the possibility of regaining her former mode of life which eventually makes her surrender to her dark future. This brings gloomy and dark perceptions and judgments of the future.

These external and internal conflicts she undergoes are the outcomes of her surrender to the obligations of society. From the very beginning of the novel, her psychological decline starts gradually. The following examples show some of symptoms of her psychological disorders. In some incidents, she starts to talk to herself loudly and is afraid that her servant may listen to her. Her isolation makes her terrified and scared to see her servant since she does not treat him well and consequently she is afraid of being hurt. In some incidents, she starts to muddle between reality and dreams and never cares about what happens around her which is a sign of depression.

Women have to stay at home and take care of their husbands, children and homes while men have to fulfill their family's needs by working outside. Lessing illustrates women's traditional role through the basis on which Dick has chosen Mary. Mary, at the beginning of her marriage, wants to run the house the way she wants. Dick's feelings of weakness and guilt of getting married make him surrender to her by avoiding their arguments because he sees he has no right to do so. This is an instance to show how the victim becomes the oppressor if he or she has the chance. The narrator in the novel describes Dick's feelings, "Understanding himself beyond the curtain he felt again a bitter pang of guilt. He had no right to marry, no right, no right. He said it under his breath, torturing himself with the repetition" (GS 56).

Sometimes when a victim holds a powerful position he or she becomes the oppressor to assert his/her power over other inferior people. Mary, as figure of female suffering, becomes the oppressor when she becomes the boss of the farm during Dick's sickness. The male authority in society is rooted in times immemorial since the leading position is associated with the male figure. Mary admits that she has absorbed her leadership ability from her father through observing him treat his servants. This shows that it is the norm for man to hold the leading position while it is not so for women to do that.

Dick is more powerful than Mary; He accuses and blames her for losing the servants in the farm because of cruel treatment toward them. He says that the workers do not come back and other workers will not work in the farm because Dick gains a bad reputation because of the bad treatment the natives have faced. Dick is a failure as a farmer and all through the novel the reader is given proof of his futile attempts to make profit from the land that is his to reap. The first insight into this is given to the reader at the beginning of the novel through the character of Charlie. Charlie is exactly what the discourse says that he should be and wants him to be: rational, determined, successful, and therefore a good colonist. Dick, on the other hand, has many of the traits that are associated with the black man and thus should never be traits of a British colonizer. He is irrational, unsuccessful and without the chance to improve his financial position and his position in society.

Any society that consists of people from different races faces this problem. But 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 behavior toward them just as the native had toward her.

People have a notion that the only relationship that they can have between people from different races is master- servant relationship. The Afrikaans suffer from this since time immemorial. Anyone who treats his or her servants humanely will be rejected from the entire society. The fear of being rejected forces the community to keep them the Afrikaans under their control. Power corrupts man and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Tony suffers from the pressure given by the people of his community. They ask him not to give due respect to the Afrikaans. He wanted to respect everyone and treat people of all races as equals but the societal norms does not allow him to act according to his conscience. The narrator describes Tony's conflict through this quotation:

When old settlers say "One had 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." Most of these young men were brought up with vague ideas about equality. They were shocked, for the first week or so, by the way natives were treated. (GS 11)

The narrator shows how the masters hurt their servants unconsciously since it is normal for them to treat them badly. The masters used to address their servants in a humiliating way or describing them by using words which underestimate and hurt them. Mary describes the servants as savages or niggers because masters believe that they are not human; therefore, they justify the brutal way in treating their servants. Unsuccessful marriage resulted in absolute disintegration in Mary's life.

Lessing going deep into the human psyche depicts that the gulf between individual understandings can never be compensated. This dark abyss is again manifested in racial discrimination through the relationship between Mary and her black slave Moses who is portrayed in this novel as the representative of patriarchal society. Moses, the black slave, killed Mary to take vengeance on the Whites. Thus Mary is the only victim of the menace of the patriarchal society. Lessing exquisitely shows how the protagonist of the novel suffered and was killed.

Lessing has succeeded in representing this problem in an artistic way with other dimensions, such as women's rights. Lessing has represented the cruel people who do not believe in equality between races, although Lessing all of her life has taken care of the natives to provide them with their rights. Wilbur Scott in his introduction to *The Moral Approach: Literature and Moral ideas*, says, "Freedom is thus not only liberation from circumstances, but subjection to inner law" (24).

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