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Black-White Relationship in Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract: This paper studies Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* in order to explore in it the complex and ambivalent relationship between a White woman and Black man. This novel probes deep into the psychology of female character whose background is exactly opposite of her condition after her marriage. As a writer Lessing sheds light upon the cruelty of the real world instead of creating something imaginary which cannot be felt by people around the world. The novel depicts a complex clash of value system. What is known to all is in White settlers society men outrank women even more than they do at home in middle class England. This natural relationship of dominant man and submissive woman becomes problematic in this society only when the man is black and the woman white. And as a result of it the female characters undergoes many emotional upheavals and at last succumbs to her own tragedy. Though this paper analyzes this work from the point of view of Black White relationship, the reader can also opt for psychoanalytical, feministic, racial and autobiographical analysis of this work. Through these viewpoints, one can glean the fact that this novel is a multi-thematic one.

Doris Lessing is a British writer who was born in 1919 in Kermanshah, Iran. Her parents moved to Southern Rhodesia (South Africa) when she was five years old. She went to England in 1949 to live there permanent. Her parents moved to southern Rhodesia in order to earn money because the European people believed that they will become rich once they go to Africa and work in farming. Her parents did not succeed in achieving their goal since her father’s health condition got worse. She attended the convent where she learnt sewing, cooking and taking care of animals. She did not complete her education because she left school at the age of 14 to find a job. She got married twice and got two children from her first marriage and a child from the second. She met her second husband Gottfried Lessing when she was a member in the communist party. She worked hard to achieve social justice for the black Rhodesian people who were suffering from poverty and cruel treatment of their white masters.

She published her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing* in 1950 and began her career as a professional writer. Her fiction is deeply autobiographical, much of it emerging out of her experiences in Africa. Drawing upon her childhood memories and her serious engagement with politics and social concerns, Lessing has written about the clash of cultures, the gross injustices of racial inequality, the struggle among opposing elements within an individual’s own personality, and the conflict between the individual conscience and the collective good. Her stories and novellas set in Africa, published during the fifties and early sixties, decry the dispossession of black Africans by white colonials, and expose the sterility of the white culture in southern Africa. She wrote the *Children of Violence* series (1951-1959), a formally conventional bildungsroman about the growth in consciousness of her heroine, Martha Quest. She broke new ground with *The Golden Notebook* (1962), a daring narrative experiment, in which the multiple selves of a contemporary woman are rendered in astonishing depth and...
detail. Her other novels include The Good Terrorist (1985) and The Fifth Child (1988); she also published two novels under the pseudonym Jane Somers (The Diary of a Good Neighbour, 1983 and If the Old Could..., 1984). In 2007 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her final novel was Alfred and Emily. She died on November 17, 2013.

The Grass is Singing a story of a girl namely Mary who is satisfied in living single life with her job and freedom. But as she crosses her age of thirty, she overhears the comments of her friends that she lacks something and that is why she is not getting married. This enrages her and she decides to marry. After a brief courtship with Dick/ Richard Turner, she gets married with him. Actually she is not interested in marriage but to shut the mouths of her friends she marries. She does not even love Dick but as she did not get any body of her age, she was forced to select him as her husband.

As she goes with him, at first she tries to take interest in keeping house tidy. But as it was two room shack, there was nothing more she can do with it. Gradually it was difficult for her to do with it. The relation between the husband and wife was also not intimate. Since Dick was poor, he did not even agree to give her child. She is cut off from her city friends, isolated in a ramshackle farmhouse in a hostile landscape, and married to a farmer whose every venture is an abysmal failure. At one point her discontent reaches such a pitch that she runs back to the city where she had been so happy before. But starting again is impossible. She has been so long away that even her clothes mark her off as being of the poor farmer class. Her attempt to get her old job back fails badly and leaves her humiliated.

Eventually, her husband arrives to bring her back to the farm. She is so dispirited that she goes with him uncomplainingly. Her mental health deteriorates still further. She is filled with a profound hatred of her social situation. Meanwhile Dick falls sick and she has to go into the fields to look after the niggers who were employed by Dick. Now the fact is that she is utterly feministic and she has an impulse of dominating the males. This is actually an account of her childhood experiences when her mother suffered a lot at the hand of her drunkard father. She treats the poor niggers with Cruelty. Actually she forgets that the condition of the black people in that area is as subordinate as her condition is. She hates those people. Once she whips one of them namely Moses in such a manner that scar appears on his face. Mary is overtly racist, believing that whites should be masters over the native blacks. Dick and Mary both often complain about the lack of work ethic among the natives that work on their farm. While Dick is rarely cruel to the workers that work for them, Mary is quite cruel. She treats herself as their master and superior. She shows contempt for the natives and finds them disgusting and animal-like. Mary is cross, queenly, and overtly hostile to the many house servants she has over the years. When Mary oversees the farm labour she is much more repressive than Dick had ever been. She lets them work harder, reduces their break time, and arbitrarily takes money from their pay. Her hatred of natives results in her whipping the face of a worker because he speaks to her in English, telling her he stopped work for a drink of water.
But, gradually her condition deteriorates. She is unable to cope up with her loneliness and futility. She starts to lose her mental peace. As Dick gets well he appoints one of the niggers as her maid servant in the house. He is no other than Moses. At first she refuses to accept him as her servant but as Dick insists, she has no option. Her relationship with him is highly ambiguous. At first she hates him but she is also attracted toward his strong body. The fear of his physical power and of her own sexual impulses, combined with her frustration at Dick’s inability to run the farm, challenge her to dominate the native. But when her condition becomes worst, she is totally depending on him. He helps her wearing dress and other such activities. On the one hand, it is governed by her received ideas about class and colour; on the other, she becomes ever more dependent on him. These mixed dispositions cause confusion for both of them.

After many years living on the farm together, Dick and Mary are seen to be in a condition of deterioration. Mary often goes through spells of depression, during which she is exhausted of energy and motivation. In her frailty, Mary ends up relying more and more on Moses. As Mary becomes weaker, she finds herself feeling endearment towards Moses.

Once their neighbour, Slatter visits them and Mary is seen being carelessly and thoughtlessly kind to Moses. This enrages Slatter. Slatter demands that Mary should not be allowed to live with that worker as a house servant. Slatter sees himself as defending the values and integrity of the white community.

Slatter uses his authority and influence to convince Dick to give up ownership of his farm and go on a vacation with his wife. This vacation is to be a sort of convalescence for them. Dick spends his last month on his farm with Tony, who has been hired by Slatter to take over the running of the farm. Tony has good intentions and is very superficially cultured, but he finds himself having to adapt to the racism of the white community. One day Tony sees Moses dressing Mary and is surprised and somewhat amazed by Mary's breaking of the colour bar.

The book closes with Mary's death at the hand of Moses. Mary is expecting his arrival and is aware of her imminent death. Moses does not run from the scene as he originally intends but waits a short distance away for the arrival of the police.

Moses symbolizes a warning to the oppressive establishment of what is going happen if they continue dehumanizing an entire race. The narrator says, “The newspaper did not say much. People all over the country must have glanced at the paragraph with its sensational heading and felt a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could have been expected. When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have.” Any revelation of the real motive behind the murder would have been a serious affront to the colonial establishment as it upset their sense of superiority. How could they come to terms with the fact that a white woman had sexually desired her black servant? But not everyone in the white establishment is fooled by the article. Tony Marston questions its credibility as he has witnessed Mary being somewhat cosy with Moses. Marston sees Moses buttoning Mary
Turner’s dress in the bedroom, and thus he is not convinced that this is a simple murder case as the newspaper article would want the country to believe. The murder of Mary Turner is not even a crime of passion. This is a clearly calculated murder whose genesis can be traced to the time when Mary whipped Moses when Moses, after working for several hours without rest, decides to take a break but exceeds the stipulated time. This infuriates Mary who is supervising the black servants in place of Dick who has fallen ill. Moses asks for water but instead Mary responds by lashing, leaving a painful cut in his forehead. Symbolically, the request for water represents the first, non-violent attempts to end colonialism and how they are met with even more oppression by the settlers.

It is only with the murder that we realize that he wanted to get closer to his oppressors so that he could cut them down when they least expected it. Once Moses has gained Mary’s confidence, he begins treating her as an equal; asking her questions previously considered taboo in the realm of colonial black-white relations. Mary, who is not happy to live the isolated life of a farmer’s wife, starts degenerating mentally. And soon she is haunted by the presence of Moses: he is someone she looks at as both a father figure-lover, as well as a hulking menace. When she is at her most vulnerable, from a psychological point of view, Moses strikes.

Thus Moses embodies important aspects of black-white relations. He feels that he has the responsibility of redemption of his entire race. Therefore, the murder of Mary is treated posed to the mentality of British people who have been oppressing and exploiting the black for ages. As such, through this story Doris Lessing has brought into the light the true nature of complex relationship of the White and Black people. The racial discrimination which has been a tool in the hands of White people turns as a boomerang on them. The story also reveals the fact that women and blacks are both oppressed by the collective, the dominant white male British culture.

**Work Cited:**